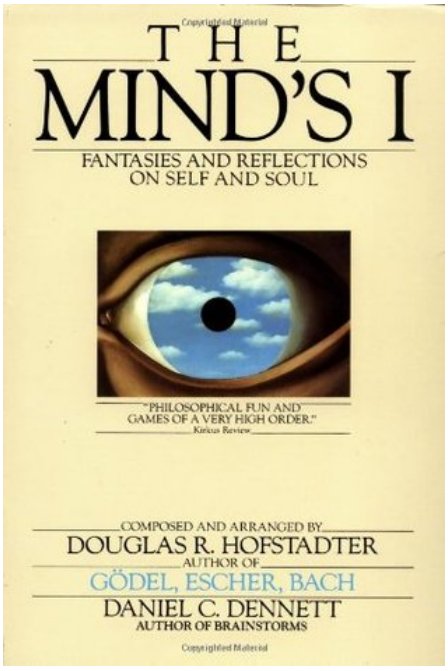

The Mind’s I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul

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Brilliant, shattering, mind-jolting, *The Mind's I* is a searching, probing cosmic journey of the mind that goes deeply into the problem of self and self-consciousness as anything written in our time. From verbalizing chimpanzees to scientific speculations involving machines with souls, from the mesmerizing, maze-like fiction of Borges to the tantalizing, dreamlike fiction of Lem and Princess Ineffable, her circuits glowing read and gold, *The Mind's I* opens the mind to the Black Box of fantasy, to the windfalls of reflection, to new dimensions of exciting possibilities.

"Ever since David Hume declared in the 18th century that the Self is only a heap of perceptions, the poor Ego has been in a shaky conditions indeed...Mind and consciousness becomes dispensable items in our accounts of reality, ghosts in the bodily machine...Yet there are indications here and there that the tide may be tuming...and the appearance of *The Mind's I*, edited by Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett, seems a welcome sign of change." William Barrett, *The New York Times Book Review*

The Mind’s I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul Details

Date	:	Published April 1st 1985 by Bantam Books (first published 1981)
ISBN	:	9780553345841
Author	:	Douglas R. Hofstadter (editor) , Daniel C. Dennett (editor)
Format	:	Paperback 512 pages
Genre	:	Philosophy, Nonfiction, Science, Psychology

From Reader Review The Mind’s I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul for online ebook

Tim Petersik says

Hofstadter has collected a set of intriguing essays, short stories, and mini-plays, all designed to help us question our conceptions of "mind." it worked on me the first and second times I read the book. Looking forward to a third.

John Jr. says

Among the working assumptions with which we get through the day are those that tell us we have a self, that its decisions are or at least can be freely willed rather than determined, that our intelligence as employed in language transcends what a machine can do, and that these qualities and processes are somehow connected with, embodied in, our physical being, mainly our brain. Philosophers have been questioning these assumptions for some time and proposing answers to the conundrums they provoke. The three words which are the first thing (often the only thing) most of us associate with Descartes, "cogito, ergo sum," were the result of this; after wondering whether his entire mental experience might be an elaborate hoax created by a demon, he concluded, to oversimplify, that because he was able to think he must exist--there must be something doing the thinking. He was neither the first nor the last to wonder about such things.

Numerous recent pieces of fiction and nonfiction examining these issues are contained in this book. I've learned since reading it that the ideas discussed, and in many cases the actual texts, are seen as groundbreaking, essential works in their field. A sampling of its contents:

• The brains-in-vats idea that was employed, in slightly different form, in the movie *The Matrix*.

• A fable-like version of the reality-is-a-dream idea, dramatized by Jorge Luis Borges in "The Circular Ruins." (Incidentally, a similar treatment, relying on virtual reality rather than dreams, is used by the movie *The Thirteenth Floor*).

• A tale of simulated consciousnesses, which also manages to question the nature and existence of God, told by Stanislaw Lem in "Non Serviam." Personally, this was the most astounding piece in the book and was, as they say, worth the price of admission all by itself.

• John Searle's challenge to the notion that a machine intelligence can ever understand anything, encapsulated in his translator-in-a-box concept.

• Thomas Nagel's speculation on the nature of consciousness in "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"

• Richard Dawkins's exposition of the idea of memes--surely you've heard of them by now--in an excerpt from his book The Selfish Gene.

The entire book seems to be available online, though in a less-than-ideal format. Taste it there if you want, but if you're like me you'll prefer to curl up with a real book; there's no e-reader form.

Mateo Simpson says

Honestly this changed my way of thinking on several levels.

Peter Mcloughlin says

collection of philosophical think pieces and science fiction stories that touch upon consciousness, the self, identity, Artificial intelligence and animal consciousness. I was delighted when I read this book in the 1990s with the imaginative ideas around the problem of consciousness. Upon reading twenty or so years later I am still struck by how the stories and puzzles presented are still with us. I don't know if this is a good thing or a bad thing but I think it does a good job of expanding imaginative horizons even if the questions it raises are still unsolved.

Maggie Roessler says

Explores the nature of personal identity through some good ol fashioned concept fracture. Think you know who you are, where you are, how you are? Well what if ....

Thanks for uprooting several dualists still lurking about in me, and letting them shrivel in the glare of the one gold sun.

I liked that, while a collection intended to provoke in a variety of ways, the reflections limited the whole. None of this wishywashy isn't that so INteresting crap; rather, this is right and that is wrong, and here is why ha ha. I especially liked their reflections on Searle (the knobs) and Nagel (what does it mean to make subject object Gödel Carroll my oh my).

Though I was disappointed because - in the first Borges essay, "Borges and I", I thought that the reflection was still a continuation of the essay, and a third character, Borges reflecting on himself in the style of a literary critic, had emerged! I was joyous! Sadly, no.

The functional systemic picture that emerges from the reflections and several selections is lovely - but again, as with all theories born of concept fracture, the whole point of the original concept in question is lost; what would a meaning mean? (Sprache muss sich selbst mitteilen!!!) At one level I'm mechanic, at another fleshy, at another conceptual, here through time, there through possibility, just as long as I'm ACTive I'm an I, sure I buy it. But it hangs on where you're standing and why you're speaking, and that far they do not go. Makes me wonder what they really want to know.

And why can't we just sit down and really talk about the nature of subjectivity as opposed to objectivity. Let's get it on the table, no OFF the table and into the kitchen! Let's bake it stir it spice it whatever, but just stop taking it for granted!

Ami Iida says

This is the cognitive science.

the book contains science thoughts and SF anthology of course Borges's shot stories
and short criticisms.
the innovative anthology.

it is SF anthology and thought experiment about brain and consciousness.

Joshua Stein says

I like both Dennett and Hofstadter, but I can't say that I particularly enjoyed *The Mind's Eye*. It has a lot of interesting ideas, but doesn't have the time to develop them given the story-reflection format of the text. While the book includes a number of seminal pieces in philosophy of mind, as well as some great pieces of fiction, they dont' really fit together all that well stylistically or intellectually, and often Dennett and Hofstadter spend a fair amount of time justifying the inclusion of the piece in the book.

I will say that both do a fair job writing their own reflections, and discussing the ideas in some of the earlier works, which are used alongside writing by Borges and Nozick and Searle, but those are really the only major brightspots in a work that feels sewn together in odd places, presented in a way that is just south of playful [something Dennett and Hofstadter generally do very well].

I think that the major problem for the book is the format. Both of these guys are famous for developing their ideas in a text and being able to really draw out some interesting detail while presenting very difficult material in an engaging way. That is their wheelhouse when it comes to writing, but they obviously don't manage it here because they don't have the time to develop their own ideas and the inclusion of a good deal of other work forces them to bounce around to subjects that, while interesting, are not developed enough to be satisfying.

To folks who are interested in reading a few of the sections of the book as they seem them, and interested in Dennett and Hofstadter's commentary, I totally understand picking the book up, but if you're looking for an engaging read on philosophy of mind that explores some of the interesting features of phenomenology or artificial intelligence, best look elsewhere. Dennett has *Consciousness Explained* and *Sweet Dreams* and Hofstadter has *I am a Strange Loop*. All of those works develop many of the same ideas that are in the book, but in more depth and with some thought that is easier to track.

Ross says

This book is the best way to introduce Philosophy as relevant. Anyone intending to apply philosophy to life will inevitably meet the question "what use is it to me?". When we pose that question ourselves it is comparitively easy to cast around for answers when we already know ways in which it can be applied. To give someone else a response such as "it teaches us to analyse arguments" is rarely helpful. This book however contains lots of little nuggets in easy to read formats such as Lem's fairytales or the musical references each of which will apply to an individual. If the right piece is matched to the right person I have never met anyone who could resist begining to read the few pages of analysis that followed. At that point the person has engaged with the idea and the resistance, not to mention the perception that philosophy is 'boring and for boring old men', is lost. Irrespective of what the person goes on to do if they do it with less fear of 'intellectual study' this will already have been a practical application on philosophy.

Erik Graff says

I was given this book as a gift from one of the most interesting persons I've ever known.

During the period before entering Loyola University Chicago and one semester into attending there I worked at a cafe/bookstore across the street from its Lake Shore Campus. It had been my hangout for years previously as the second floor location fronted the east with large windows, making the woodsy place sunny and warm. By the early eighties I was pretty well known there.

The way one met people was usually by asking the person next to you what s/he was reading. Presumably that's how Natalie and I met. In any case, we talked a lot. She was unusually well-read and earnest about much of her studying because she was, she told me, episodically insane.

This was all very interesting to talk about. In a few weeks, however, I saw it happen: intense head pain followed by disorientation. I probably took her to the hospital at least four times.

Years later it was discovered that her problem was water retention associated with her cycle. When other women would discharge, fluid would build up within her. The increased pressure in the brain would lead to the symptoms. The simple cure: water pills.

To grow up feeling different and inferior, out-of-control, to think oneself prone to insanity, was character building in Natalie's case. She was a pretty girl and could have become devoted to partying and dating. Instead, she had become unusually serious, thoughtful and, to me, fascinating.

Some time after giving me this book, she married, had a baby...then died of a brain aneurism. She was twenty-five.

The book, incidentally, was excellent and well-chosen.

Chris says

We all laugh at the thought that a machine may one day develop artificial intelligence, or that human consciousness could reside in a remotely controlled body while its brain is back in the lab, or that one’s mental processes could be stored in a book to be accessed by the manual computation of future readers; but embedded in these simple vignettes are deeply unsettling challenges to the way we view human consciousness and even the concepts of soul and self-worth. This book is a test of the endurance of concepts like spirit and consciousness, and if you’ve ever waivered under the onslaught of materialistic reductionism, I promise you this book will come close to kicking out your remaining legs. However, it was supremely entertaining and searching, and ultimately I found it to offer the most beautiful alternatives to a holistic, spiritualized view of existence that I have ever come across.

Near the beginning of the book the authors had warned of two extremes to avoid: solipsism—the idea that I am the only conscious being in the universe, and Panpsychism—the idea that everything in the universe is conscious. They steered pretty clear of solipsism, and though I would never have expected them to fall into the camp of panpsychism with animists, I truly think they veered towards panpsychism by attributing mind and even suffering to all things which might potentially behave mechanistically like humans do…which includes everything. While trying to avoid falling into the pot of attributing ‘soul’ to a few things, and in their attempt to eliminate the exclusive way soul is applied to only humans, the authors fell into the fire of asserting that everything has soul-like qualities, which is to say that everything has a soul, even if it isn’t

traditional way to think about soul.

Nonetheless, a very pertinent and tenable question is posed that isn't easily dismissed. Hofstadter gave the analogy of a flame to illustrate the soul dilemma:

"We just fall like a ton of bricks for the notion that there's a "soul" in there—a flame-like soul that can flicker on or off, or even be transferred between bodies as a flame between candles. If a candle blows out and is relit, is it "the same flame"? Or, if it stays lit, is it even "the same flame" from moment to moment?"

A flame is a process of combustion, but not a thing separate from fuel or ignition. It's both process and material, so in some sense a flame lives on, and in another sense it dies and is reborn from moment to moment. The comfort found here, for those who feel the loss of soul in science, is that our bodies and minds are elements continually left in the past, one with new elements added every new instant, and the total process by which these transitions occur and support the process. The continuity which we call soul or consciousness continues in some mysterious way, replacing of cells in our bodies, and over the course of time, replacing our entire body many times over the course of a lifetime. This continuity can even be stretched to an understanding of life beyond death, for just as a flame is blown out, and may be relit later, so it is conceivable that mind may be 'relit' and reconstituted after death in a very physical way, given enough time, and maybe in hitherto undreamed ways. We don't know what consciousness is, or how it got here, and we can't say it will never make an appearance again. Since we already have the precedent of it being here at all and being conscious, there's good reason to believe this flame of consciousness will show up again somewhere in this or that universe.

By brilliantly rephrasing the problem of soul, the authors are avoiding a 'yes/no' sort of answer, and moving instead toward a radical reinterpretation of soul and self that is consistent with materialistic science. I have to admit, it's about time. The idea of a soul, as most conceive of it, is an old idea, and was never meant to be plugged into modern scientific formulas. Even as a religious concept it has been, throughout the ages, fraught with complications which for a while people were happy to turn their heads and ignore for the sake of comfort and stability. However, in these days, when bodies live longer and we have the luxury of spending time asking questions and growing into the answers, we don't have to feel rushed to premature answers lest we die in the process of questioning. The book's challenges to the ancient concept of soul and spirit is especially valid for our time, if a bit unsettling.

To tackle the difficult and often abstract topics of self and consciousness, the authors—gurus in computer science and philosophy—use imaginative stories and thought experiments to stretch readers' cerebral muscles, warming them up to start asking questions like, "Who am I? Am 'I' a simple monad, with complex feelings, thoughts and acts? Am I fooling myself to think I am a cohesive being with clearly defined boundaries, functions and…worth?" Maybe it's impossible to simplify our identity—humanity may be, as Hermann Hesse phrased it, "so far from being a unity, is in the highest degree a manifold world, a constellated heaven, a chaos of forms, of states and stages, of inheritances and potentialities"—but this work sure takes the conversation a step forward towards clarity.

Oddly enough, the book started out sounding balanced regarding ideas like holism (universe as soul) and reductionism (universe as machine), citing articles from different perspectives. But the catch—and an awesomely disorienting catch it was—was a HUGE bait-and-switch revealed all the way near the end!

"In this book there are a variety of thought experiments designed to explore the implications of the hypothesis that materialism is true: the mind or self is not another (non-physical) thing, in miraculous interaction with the brain, but somehow a natural and explainable product of the brain's organization and operation."

It was a smart move not to reveal this too early. I was actually floored when I realized that the authors were

consummate materialists who conceived of the universe and all beings inside it in purely mechanomorphic terms. It seemed to me that they were completely taken-in and driven by Richard Dawkins' ideas in "The Selfish Gene", an excerpt from this work provided in chapter 10. Dawkins' idea is that what we call life is the accidental collision and subsequent survival of enduring combinations of matter; and frankly, I understand why it is the message-thread that weaves through this entire work and probably provided the authors with their premise, however clandestine. This chapter was my first interaction with Dawkins' concepts, and I found him to be brilliant and imaginative; and though I personally don't swallow whole all of his theories—they seem to come up short in attempting to explain the phenomenon of consciousness and will—still, they are as compelling and courageous as anything I've seen from a reductionist.

Because this his hard for people to accept who are accustomed to thinking of the universe in terms of mind, spirit, and free will, the authors attempt to provide a conciliatory and inclusive definition of determinism which encompasses both sides of the debate between soul and body by saying that holism is a view of the world as top-down causality (a sophisticated whole structures the parts), and reductionism is a view of the world as bottom-up causality (the parts are always responsible for the whole, and any final rendering by the whole of the parts is first determined by the parts). The authors attempt to escape the accusation of bias by inserting the Zen idea of "mu", which "unasks the question" and reveals that "there is a larger context into which both holistic and reductionistic explanations fit." But really, though mu is a fun concept aimed at assuaging the fears and defenses of holistic thinkers, it's clear that the authors preponderantly believe we are a random collection of atoms. Still, and maybe in spite of the attempt to introduce-but-minimize it, I found mu to be a very useful way of getting back to the assumptions. By the end, I was actually endeared to mu and to an understanding of the mechanistic process of nature, even in reductionist terms.

Religious or holistic thinkers may ask, how could determinism become endearing to humans who are typically so focused on free will? The key is an understanding that all determined parts are part of the determining whole. One determines as much as one is determined. There is no abstract universe 'out there' that is making us. We are as significant a part of the universe as anything else, therefore the universe resides in us. I am the universe in that I am a real part of the whole, and without myself, there is no whole. Therefore, I am the determined part, and the determining whole—both determined and determining. An excerpt from Raymond Smullyan's dialogue between God and man (chapter 20, "Is God a Taoist?") helps to illustrate this:

"[God speaking to man] Your acts are certainly in accordance with the laws of nature, but to say they are determined by the laws of nature creates a totally misleading psychological image which is that your will could somehow be in conflict with the laws of nature and that the latter is somehow more powerful than you, and could 'determine' your acts whether you liked it or not. But it is simply impossible for your will to ever conflict with natural law. You and natural law are really one and the same…Don't you see that the so-called 'laws of nature' are nothing more than a description of how in fact you and other beings do act? They are merely a description of how you act, not a prescription of how you should act, not a power or force which compels or determines your acts. To be valid, a law of nature must take into account how in fact you do act, or, if you like, how you choose to act…But the confusion is largely caused by your bifurcation of reality into the 'you' and the 'not you'. Really now, just where do you leave off and the rest of the universe begin? Or where does the rest of the universe leave off and you begin?"

There are definite pros to believing in this kind of determinism:
1. Mind and thought may not be as unique to human experience as previously thought; but nor are we as alone, isolated, and unsolvable as previously thought.
2. We may not have souls; but whatever it is we do have, nature has a lot of material to make more for a long time, again and again.
3. We may be determined, but we are also integral to, and synonymous with, the determining whole.

Whether or not one finds the ideas in the book to be palatable, it certainly is a wild ride nonetheless. The best

chapters in the book are, in order of appearance:

On Having No Head—A fun and strangely convincing essay about the myth we have all bought into that tells us we have heads. It's a hoax! We've never seen our heads, and our subjective perspective eliminates the option of us experiencing our own heads as objects. Genius.

The Turing Test—The famous Turing Test fable which first appeared in Scientific American in 1981. Are we sure that computers won't ever be able to think like humans? This hypothetical test will leave you wondering.

Selfish Genes and Selfish Memes (by Richard Dawkins)—A must read about how mind may have been formed by the 'mindless' evolution of particles which clumped together to form 6 forms of stability: longevity/fecundity/copying-fidelity/competition/combination/colonization. Much emphasis is laid on the human body as a survival machine, future thought as simulated models of trial and error, and memes as transmittable culture (ideas) which is currently the most advanced form of evolution and self-replication. The Selfish Gene is probably the seminal work which forms the undercurrent for the entire present volume.

Prelude…Ant Fugue—Very creative, if hard-to-read-at-times, analogy about how the brain works somewhat 'accidentally' to form a holistic system that appears to be conscious as a whole when really it is only as conscious as a stone. Brilliant.

The Story Of a Brain— A brain is kept alive in a nutrient bath beyond the death of the body, and the brain is stimulated artificially to provide 'experiences'. Eventually the brain is broken up into halves, parts, and finally into separate neurons which were replaced when they wore out. Is it the same brain when replaced neuron by neuron? Is it still conscious?

Where Am I/ Where was I?— A brain is removed from its body and the body is sent into hazardous situations. Consciousness is generated by the brain, but resides in the body. Eventually the body is replaced with new bodies. Is consciousness in the body, brain, or neither? Which body is my body?

The Riddle Of the Universe And Its Solution—An infectious thought is sending people into catatonic states, and scientists try to isolate the idea in media before they succumb. An analogy to unsolved paradoxes that tangles people's thoughts and hamstrings basic logic. Is this recurring feedback what creates consciousness?

Is God a Taoist?— A man has a very unpredictable discussion with God. God redefines man's idea of free will, suffering, and evil. The redefinitions of theistic and humanistic ideas are astounding and very useful.

An Unfortunate Dualist—A man takes a drug to kill his soul because he no longer wants to live, but the drug helps the body and brain continue on as normal so a bodily suicide does not negatively impact others. What happens to consciousness?

What Is it Like To Be a Bat?—Philosopher Thomas Nagel speculates on what it is like to be a bat, and determines that we can't really know what it is like to be anything other than ourselves. The problem of subject/object duality and relation needs to be explored more.

An Epistemological Nightmare— An epistemologist builds a brain-reading machine and ends up being driven crazy by it because people's meanings, and even one's own internal meanings, are so varied.

A Conversation With Einstein's Brain— Best chapter in the book! This one really blew my mind. Imagine if Einstein's brain was catalogued into book with a separate page for every neuron including its threshold values, resistance values, structural change calculations etc. If we input data from a spoken question like, "Hello Einstein, how are you?", would one be able to run the data through the book to compute a response

from Einstein’s brain to contemporary conversation partners? If so, would that make Einstein dead or alive? It’s a trap!

Fiction—All characters in a story are the author’s thoughts, and therefore, in some sense, are the author. Does the author’s meaning change the character’s feeling about their part in the story? Do we feel our part in the story of life is changed if the state of the author (ourselves or God) is changed?

The structure of the book was very helpful. Introductions were provided for topics, then vignettes illustrated the topics, and these were followed by a reflection by the authors to help readers distill the take-aways. The philosophical gleanings were bountiful, and the challenges to traditional ways of thinking about humanity and human consciousness were well worth the work.

Bottom line: what do we really know about consciousness and mind? Very little as it turns out, but enough to rule out, according to the authors, antiquated ideas about soul. Still, the subjective-objective tension, and the balance between holism and reductionism keeps this matter from being over-simplified and conclusive. What do we really know about other people’s conscious experience in general? What do we really know about our own past conscious experience, say, even 5 years ago? As one author states, “When you come right down to it, it’s not so clear just what it is like to be me, right now.”

Like this review? Clicking ‘like’ lets me know someone’s reading! For more reviews, visit my blog at www.bookburningservice.blogspot.com and start following!

Joel Bass says

This was a big influence on me. Good stuff.

Marco says

Si pu?? vedere questo libro in due modi: 1) come una collezione di racconti o divertissement fantascientifici orientati prevalentemente al "mindfuck" del lettore; 2) come un tortuoso trattatello sul problema della relazione tra mente e cervello, volto a tirare acqua al mulino del riduzionismo fisicalista dei due autori, noti per le loro posizioni fortemente anti-dualiste.
Considerato dal primo punto di vista, "The mind's I" ?? un testo eccellente, che raccoglie scritti brillanti e ricchi di spunti suggestivi. Oltre ad ospitare ben noti racconti-capolavoro di Borges, Lem, Rucker, il volume offre l'occasione per leggere "in originale" il celebre argomento della "Stanza cinese" di Searle o "What is it like to be a bat", di Nagel. Un po' meno classe mostrano le frequenti auto-citazioni dell'Hofstadter di "G??del, Escher, Bach" o dello stesso Dennett, ma non si pu?? dire che siano loro a compromettere la godibilit?? dell'insieme.
Visto come saggio di carattere filosofico, il libro ?? invece piuttosto presuntuoso e truffaldino. La consueta abitudine dei due autori - quella di "guardare al dito" per sostenere la non-esistenza della Luna - ?? qui portata all'estremo con la scusa del limitarsi a fornire qualche commento non organico ai testi presentati. La "soluzione" al problema mente-cervello che emerge dal testo nel suo complesso ?? profondamente lacunosa e solo eufemisticamente definibile come "gioco di specchi". Si tratta pi?? che altro di un gioco di prestigio alimentato da una retorica di seconda categoria, dalla sistematica elusione delle domande-chiave, e da un dogmatismo che - francamente - cozza piuttosto visibilmente con la caleidoscopicit?? delle visioni proposte nei brani che compongono l'antologia.

Georges says

I recommend to anyone who is starting in AI area.

Robert Bagnall says

What time you read a book makes a big difference; this was my book to read when I got up an hour or so before everybody else in the house. But maybe if I had read it at some other time of day I wouldn't have such a feeling of my brain being full, that the mental sharpness that I had during my philosophy degree had, like Elvis, left the building. But maybe it's the book, not me? Whilst the mix of academic paper and sci-fi short story works (science fiction being, after all, primarily the fiction of ideas), I found too many of the items - Hofstadter's dialogues in particular - flabby and self-satisfied. Sitting here having just closed the book, the impression I take away from it is that sections that could have made their points more succinctly rambled on and on, overloading the many papers - Dawkins, Nozick, Searle, Dennett's himself - that didn't outstay their welcome. I suspect I would have given this more than three stars if I'd gotten around to reading it when I bought it in 1994 as a 24-year old cognitive science postgraduate...

Chant Cowen says

I'm familiar with Hofstadter's 'Gödel, Escher, Bach' (which I have yet to tackle), but this isn't so much a book written by Hotstadter entirely, but a collection of writings from various people known in the world of the philosophy of mind (Daniel Dennett being the other person that helped with the arranging of the articles in this book).

I should also preface this by saying that I've read plenty of these articles in their original journals or other compilations (IE. Nagel's 'What is it to be like a bat' in Nagel's 'Mortal Questions' and Searle's 'Minds, Brains, and Computers' in too many books to count), so the articles that were new to me were of interest for me when diving into this volume.

The book has a variety of writings that were originally published in philosophy journals, but others were more in the vain of short stories on the question of AI or consciousness studies, which I quite enjoyed reading and getting a feel for. One of particular interest would be Turing's paper, Dennet's paper 'Where Am I?', and Raymond Smullyan's 'An Unfortunate Dualist'.

I would suggest for the curious reader to go through the book and pick articles to read of interest, but be noted that some articles are in response to one another, so do keep an eye on it.

However a good collection.

David says

How conciousness is derived from neural activity - questions concerning free will and determinism - Turing

machines and Ai

Manny says

I have been conducting a long discussion about the nature of consciousness with Lotz, Robert and Wastrel in the comment thread to this review. I thought I might as well summarize my position and move the conversation to a more sensible place.

To cut to the chase, I am doubtful that the "problem of consciousness" really is such an interesting philosophical problem any more. Obviously, until you have reached a certain point in the development of human knowledge, the existence of the mental sphere - thoughts, sensations, intentions, desires, and so on - is something utterly extraordinary that is in great need of an explanation. But I think that's no longer true.

Although the development of modern neuroscience has helped, I don't see this as the decisive thing. Neuroscience still doesn't understand the brain terribly well. What I do see as decisive is Turing's work on computability. Two hundred and fifty years earlier, Newton had launched one of the most important paradigm changes in history: the physical world should be thought of as mathematical, and explained by mathematical formulas. Of course, he wasn't by any means the first person to think of this, but he was the first person to come up with the right kind of mathematics - partial differential equations - to *actually make it work*. And needless to say, he didn't explain the whole of physics at a stroke. But the things he did manage to explain using his new methods were so remarkable that many insightful people decided that this was the right way to go.

Turing, it seems to me, did something very similar. He suggested that the mental world should also be thought of as mathematical; once again, the reason why he got attention was that he found the appropriate kind of mathematics, this time the theory of computable functions. As with Newton, it would be ridiculous to say that Turing solved the whole problem of the nature of the mind. But he was able to offer a rigorous way of conceptualizing the mental, and people could now start constructing not only mathematical formulas that described mental functions, but also artifacts which reified those formulas as physical processes. Or, to put it more simply, you could build machines that were able to think.

It is easy to point to aspects of the mind that we still can't model mathematically with any great degree of success. We don't have good mathematical models for concepts like beauty, humor or religious feeling. We have very unsatisfactory models for emotion and language. But Turing's work is only 80 years old: think of all the physics that was still completely unexplained in 1765. (For example, there was no decent idea of what "heat" might be). Despite this, many people believed in Newton's program because of all the things it *had* explained, which until then had been more or less incomprehensible. I think Turing's program has had successes which are equally impressive; because we've already got used to them, we don't think how remarkable it is that computers can now play chess much better than any human beings, or turn normal speech into text with over 95% accuracy. As recently as the 80s, philosopher Hubert Dreyfus listed both of these as tasks which no machine would ever, *even in principle*, be able to perform.

To me, it seems quite reasonable to take Turing's program seriously and embrace its core hypothesis: there is nothing mysterious about consciousness, it is just computation. Needless to say, this idea may turn out to out to be mistaken. But right now, it's the one the human race is spending its energy investigating, for the same reason that Newton's program has beaten all its competitors. It lets you do philosophy in a quantitative way and make measurable, incremental progress.

So if that's what we in practice believe, why not admit it?

Greg says

A collection of essays and short stories from scientists, philosophers, and fiction authors, all dealing with concepts related to the self and self-consciousness. Each work is followed by commentary from either Dennett or Hofstadter.

I imagine this book is an absolutely fantastic introduction to these sorts of ideas and had I read it earlier in my life it'd probably have a 5 star rating. Still, the familiarity of the ideas discussed didn't lessen my enjoyment of the book, especially as the book progressed from standard speculative fiction/philosophical theorizing to much more complicated discussions of consciousness and the self.

The writings alone would be wonderful and thought provoking, but Dennett and Hofstadter's commentaries manage to add yet another dimension to the appreciation of all these works and provoke yet more thought about the ideas discussed.

It's also turned me on to a few authors who I may have never heard of otherwise, and whose writings I found to be extraordinary, which is a great bonus.

Roland Volz says

This book was an excellent introduction to speculative fiction divorced from the modern categories of science fiction and Tolkienesque fantasy. Daniel Dennett and Douglas Hofstadder collected stories that inspired new thoughts and ideas. This book also introduced many to non-American authors with much to offer; for instance, I was introduced to Jorge Luis Borges through this book, and he remains one of my favorite authors.

John says

very good - but not as good a GEB :-)