



Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul

By Francis Crick

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Traditionally, the human soul is regarded as a nonphysical concept that can only be examined by psychiatrists and theologists. In his new book, *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, Nobel Laureate Francis Crick boldly straddles the line between science and spirituality by examining the soul from the standpoint of a modern scientist, basing the soul's existence and function on an in-depth examination of how the human brain "sees."

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Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul By Francis Crick Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Nobel Prize-winning biochemist Crick (co-discoverer with James Watson of DNA's double helix structure) here takes readers to the forefront of modern brain research. Geared to serious lay readers and scientists, this speculative study argues that our minds can be explained, without recourse to religious concepts of a soul, in terms of the interactions of a vast assembly of nerve cells and associated molecules. Crick delves into the nature of consciousness by focusing on visual awareness, an active, constructive process in which the brain selectively combines discrete elements into meaningful images. Early chapters include numerous interactive illustrations to demonstrate the brain's shortcuts, tricks and habits of visual perception. In later chapters Crick discusses neural networks--electronic pathways that can "remember" patterns or produce spoken language--and outlines research strategies designed to pinpoint the brain's "awareness neurons" that enable us to see.

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From Library Journal

Nobel Prize winner Crick, who with James D. Watson discovered the molecular structure of DNA, considers the nature of human consciousness, focusing in particular on visual consciousness in an explanation of how the brain "sees."

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From Booklist

Winner, with James Watson, of a Nobel Prize in 1962 for their world-changing discovery of the molecular structure of DNA, Crick here devotes his considerable mental powers to the study of the brain and the nature of consciousness. No topic could be more demanding or fraught with subjectivity--not to mention mysticism--but Crick insists upon the value of rational thought, logic, and experimental verification. This perspective underlies the "Astonishing Hypothesis," which states "that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules." How's that for reductionism? But think about it. Could anything actually be more astonishing than learning that neurons make, store, and retrieve memories? Create moods? Or, and this is Crick's focus, interpret light as images? Given the impossibility of tackling consciousness in its entirety, Crick has chosen to concentrate on one crucial manifestation, visual awareness, a process far more complicated than most of us realize. While scientists have begun to understand how the brain breaks down visual information, no one knows how it puts it back together. What Crick presents is a lucid, if challenging, explanation of the components and actions of neurons, the many levels of "neural architecture" in the neocortex, and all the dynamic and constructive cognitive processes relating to vision that evolve from the incessant pulse of a myriad of molecular events.

Donna Seaman

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