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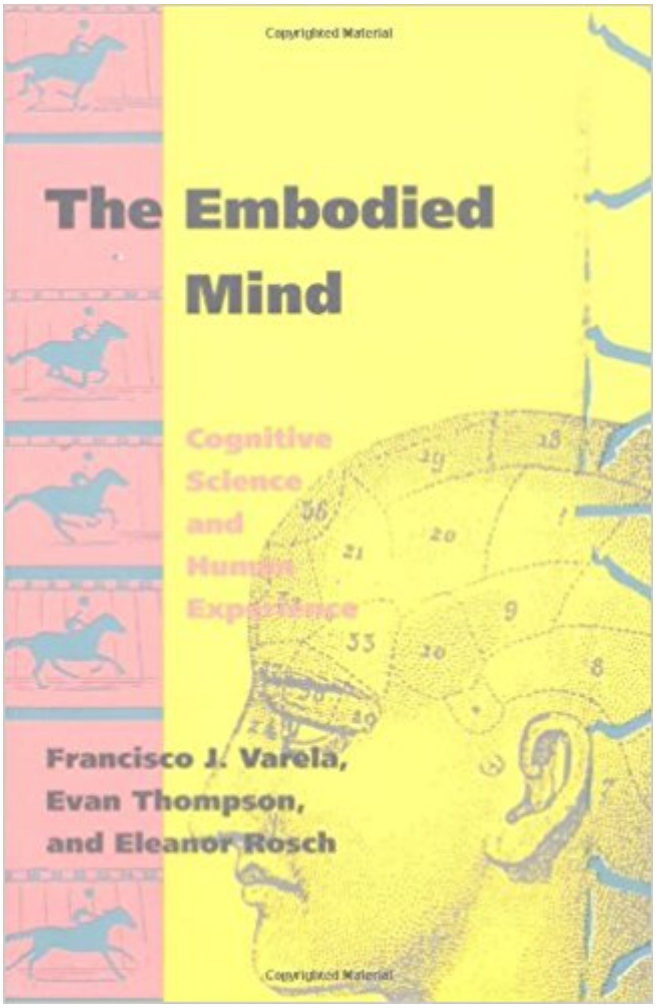
The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science And Human Experience



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Synopsis

The Embodied Mind provides a unique, sophisticated treatment of the spontaneous and reflective dimension of human experience. The authors argue that only by having a sense of common ground between mind in Science and mind in experience can our understanding of cognition be more complete. Toward that end, they develop a dialogue between cognitive science and Buddhist meditative psychology and situate it in relation to other traditions such as phenomenology and psychoanalysis.

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Customer Reviews

This is perhaps the most challenging and unusual book I ever read. At first it seems similar to the other books on mind and consciousness that started appearing in the late 1980s, in response to advances in neurobiology and artificial intelligence. But the final chapters confirm that the authors were shooting for something much grander.The writers of this book, which was first published in 1991, were a "dream team" of philosopher, psychologist, and neuroscientist (the late, great Francisco Varela). They wrote for a professional audience. An interested layperson having some familiarity with philosophy of mind issues can keep up, but only with much effort; I had to stop several times to look up a term or research an important concept. But it’s worth the effort. You will review a wide variety of interesting ideas and be shown how they relate to one other, including neural networks, societies of mind, object-relations psychoanalysis, adaptive resource theory,

multi-chromatic vision, evolutionary drift, nihilism, the delusion of "self", and much more.And you will also read about Buddhism. The authors introduce Buddhist concepts every second or third chapter, noting the parallels between ancient thought and modern science (and the failures of western philosophy). Yes, this does remind one of Capra`s Tao of Physics, although the conceptual juxtapositions aren't as forced.

While I love reading Evan Thompson and Fransisco Varela, it is suprising to me how unexamined some of their positions are.For example, Varela continuously states the 'groundlessness' of being to the point where it seems to be the core of his philosophical fixation. But then when turning to the subject of ethics, he seems to not notice the contradiction between the negation of any 'ground', and the the subtle, though necessary act of POSITING which Buddhism engages in assuming that "compassion" spontaneously emerges in the 'enlightened mind'.The naivete in this view is astounding in light of modern attachment research and developmental psychology. Varela, appears to be too tendentiously 'stuck' on groundlessness to notice the problem.The problem is the act of positing. At one moment he says there is no ground and no referent, YET, he is obviously relying upon a referent by positing a 'middle way', and claiming that 'compassion arises spontaneuously in the enlightened mind'.A simple issue being ignored is the FUNDAMENTAL relational quality - and purpose - of human emotion. As attachment research shows, without an 'other' - a caregiver, mother, or some other human being - emotions don't develop and neither does the self. Varela ignores this because his purposes are different. Just like any other human being, he has needs, and his needs are more evolved - sophisticated - as philosophical notions. But nevertheless, they are needs: need to control the anxieties, fears and apprehension of meaninglessness.While I completely agree with the non-linear approach and the validity of 'dependent emergence", the fact remains, if we want any ASSOCIATION with the world outside of ourselves, we are inevitably dependent on the REALITY of the other.

This book combines four of my very favorite things: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Buddhism, dynamic systems theory, and neuroscience. I am not, therefore, the most objective reviewer. I had already bought into the authors' project before I picked up the book. I am convinced that recent developments in neuroscience and the spread of Buddhism to the West are two of the most important historical developments of the last century. I think they are both going to be extremely important in shaping the world that is currently coming to birth. So I am all for the attempt to combine the two particularly when one of my favorite philosophers (Maurice Merleau-Ponty) is

thrown in the mix for good measure.The authors of this book are attempting to do many things all at once: to chart a middle path between objectivism and subjectivism, find a solution to the problem of nihilism that attends the collapse of objectivism and belief in a unified self, combine the insights of modern neuroscience with the insights of what they call the mindfulness/meditation traditions of Buddhism, and to present their own embodied/enactive research program and contrast it with other research programs in cognitive science. The authors are fairly successful in all of their tasks, although I think they are more successful in some than in others.I am not going to try to outline the whole book. I am simply going to point out why I think this book is a really important work even for those who are not necessarily interested in the philosophy of mind. I think the authors of this book are grappling with what I consider to be the most important philosophical problems at our current historical moment.

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