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# How The Mind Works

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Unabridged

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

STEVEN PINKER

AUTHOR OF *THE LANGUAGE INSTINCT*

HOW THE  
MIND  
WORKS

with a new foreword

Performed by Mel Foster



"A model of scientific writing: erudite, witty, and clear."  
—NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS



## **Synopsis**

In this delightful, acclaimed best seller, one of the world's leading cognitive scientists tackles the workings of the human mind. What makes us rational—and why are we so often irrational? How do we see in three dimensions? What makes us happy, afraid, angry, disgusted, or sexually aroused? Why do we fall in love? And how do we grapple with the imponderables of morality, religion, and consciousness? *How the Mind Works* synthesizes the most satisfying explanations of our mental life from cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and other fields to explain what the mind is, how it evolved, and how it allows us to see, think, feel, laugh, interact, enjoy the arts, and contemplate the mysteries of life. This new edition of Pinker's bold and buoyant classic is updated with a new foreword by the author.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

It seems from reading over the reviews that your response to this book depends heavily on who you are and what your background is. I'm not a scientist, but I have a strong general science education. The book was recommended to me by a neurobiologist friend. I went in looking for a good general overview of the subject matter written by someone with a good prose style, and that's exactly what I got. If you have a general liberal artsy science grounding and want to be pointed at some new lines of inquiry, the book is terrific. I think Pinker does a better job making potentially dry subject matter exciting than just about anyone. Very few of the ideas in the book were completely new to me, but I hadn't encountered them all between two covers before and I very much enjoyed watching Pinker draw connections. It's especially interesting to compare this book to the *Selfish Gene*, which Pinker

refers to quite a bit. Richard Dawkins is more concise and clear, but has such a gratingly obnoxious and condescending authorial voice that I find it distracting. Pinker, on the other hand, is a treat to read; it's like sitting at a table with an old friend. Some scientist friends of mine have complained that Pinker speculates too much for their tastes and tries to overextend his Darwinian ideas. Fair enough, but Pinker is careful to warn the reader when he's speculating and when he's summarizing the results of actual research. I felt like I had room to think critically about his arguments while he was making them. The book is very clear about its intentions and its limitations. If you're looking for a highly focused argument backed up by hard data, this book isn't it (The Language Instinct does that better.) If you're looking for Evolutionary Biology For Dummies, this also isn't it.

Unlike most reviewers, I come to How the Mind Works \*after\* reading Blank Slate, which is by far the superior work, in what are two very similar themes. This volume could as well be entitled "How the Persona Works" as it delves very little in the science of the mind. This is not an introduction to neuroscience, but rather is much more focused on the psychology of social interaction and knowledge acquisition. I suppose I was hoping for a more structured scientific statement of how the brain is composed chemically, designed genetically, and structured systemically. In a series of sections, Pinker somewhat dis-connectedly jumps through findings from psychology and brain science to illuminate interesting problems. I found the opening sections - on areas like the mind's eye and how the brain is a thinking machine - far less interesting and compelling. Pinker describes the brain as a machine that has costs (in tissue, energy, and time) and confers benefits. Knowing where the gold is buried in your neighborhood - and whether it's broadly in the northwest quadrant, or specifically underneath the flowerpot - improves your position because it reduces the physical work required to unearth it. That one bit of information allows 1 man to find the gold which would have taken 100 if the digging was done indiscriminately. There are some very nice thought experiments in this section: "What if we took [a brain simulation computer] program and trained a large number of people, say, the population of China, to hold in mind the data and act out the steps? Would there be one gigantic consciousness hovering over China, separate from the consciousness of the billion individuals?

Steven Pinker is Professor of Psychology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of the renowned books, 'The language instinct' (Penguin, 1995) and 'Words and rules: the ingredients of language' (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000). In this book, described by one reviewer as 'the best book ever written on the human mind', he puts forward a general theory about how and

why the human mind works the way it does. Yet it is not a ponderous book; it is beautifully written and full of jokes and stories. Pinker marries Darwin's theory of evolution to the latest developments in neuroscience and computation. He shows in detail how the process of natural selection shaped our entire neurological networks; how the struggle for survival selects from among our genes those most fit to flourish in our environment. Nature has produced in us bodies, brains and minds attuned to coping intelligently with whatever our environment demands. Housed in our bodies, our minds structure neural networks into adaptive programmes for handling our perceptions. Pinker concludes, "The mind is a system of organs of computation, designed by natural selection to solve the kinds of problems our ancestors faced in their foraging way of life." Our beliefs and desires are information, allowing us to create meaning. "Beliefs are inscriptions in memory, desires are goal inscriptions, thinking is computation, perceptions are inscriptions triggered by sensors, trying is executing operations triggered by a goal." Pinker writes that the mind has a 'design stance' for dealing with artefacts, a 'physical stance' for dealing with objects, and an 'intentional stance' for dealing with people.

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