



# Altered Egos: How the Brain Creates the Self

By Todd E. Feinberg

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## Altered Egos: How the Brain Creates the Self By Todd E. Feinberg

In *Altered Egos*, Dr. Todd Feinberg presents a new theory of the self based on his first-hand experience as both a psychiatrist and neurologist.

Feinberg introduces dozens of intriguing cases of patients whose disorders have resulted in what he calls "altered egos": a change in the brain that transforms the boundaries of the self. He describes patients who suffer from "alien hand syndrome" where one hand might attack the patient's own throat, patients with frontal lobe damage who invent fantastic stories about their lives, paralyzed patients who reject and disown one of their limbs. He then argues that the brain damage suffered by these people has done more than simply impair certain functions--it has fragmented their sense of self.

From these fascinating cases, Feinberg proposes a new model of the self that links the workings of the brain with unique and personal features of the mind, such as *meaning*, *purpose*, and *being*. Drawing on his own and other evidence, he explains how the unified self, while not located in one or another brain region, arises out of the staggering complexity and number of the brain's component parts.

Lucid, insightful, filled with fascinating case studies and provocative new ideas, *Altered Egos* promises to change the way we think about human consciousness and the creation and maintenance of human identity.

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## Editorial Review

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Feinberg is a neurologist whose treatment of patients with bizarre mental illnesses has led him to ponder that sense of mental unity we call experience. As brain research has progressed, that sense has remained stubbornly resistant to explication; indeed, it has grown more mysterious even as the anatomy of the living brain has become well understood. Feinberg frequently iterates this paradox before propounding his answer to it; before then, he recounts patients who exhibited, following an injury to their brains, a drastic degradation in self-awareness. Previously ordinary people can no longer recognize themselves in mirrors; believe that their limbs belong to somebody else; and, if blinded, insist their vision is 20/20. To Feinberg, these symptoms reinforce his impression of the self's malleability and initiate his argument, with references to Descartes, about how the brain shapes the self. He offers, after refuting notions that the organ has a locus for the self as it does for vision, a version of the self-as-emergent-phenomenon idea. Avoiding undue technical jargon, Feinberg's presentation ably elucidates for general readers the material/ethereal nexus of self-perception. *Gilbert Taylor*

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## Review

"*Altered Egos* offers us a dazzling array of neurological syndromes to show how delicately constructed is our sense of self...The shock of such tales is to see how distorted your mental realm can become without you ever knowing the difference." --*New Scientist*

"Anyone perplexed by the riddle of consciousness--and who is not these days?--should read Todd Feinberg's bold, energetic account of how a brain makes a mind."--John Horgan, author of *The Undiscovered Mind*

"A fascinating book. I was astonished to find out that one of my favorite film characters, Dr. Strangelove, is actually displaying signs of 'alien hand,' a medical syndrome. There are many real-life case studies in this book used to explain the way the human mind invents and reinvents itself. A must read!"--Gus Van Sant, film director

"This is an ambitious work, tackling no less than the mind-body problem. Amazingly, it is successful in that it offers a new way of thinking about problems of self, subjectivity and meaning . . . I am extremely enthusiastic about this book."--Martha J. Farah, Professor of Psychology and Director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, University of Pennsylvania

"In the tradition of Jackson, Critchley, and Sacks, Todd Feinberg melds clinical wisdom, impressive scholarship, and profound philosophical insight to produce a lucid and enchanting account of what determines our daily actions and experiences. Far beyond the tired genre of "neurostories," *Altered Egos* examines the souls behind the symptoms to give the reader a stunning appreciation of how all the aspects of

our lives that we take for granted our perceptions, memories, feelings, and beliefs are actually sculpted and crafted from myriad experiential elements that can only be dissected and examined under the harsh lens of injury or disease. Above all, *Altered Egos* shows us how intentionality—the purposeful seeking of meaning is what distinguishes us from both beast and computer, and this warm and thoughtful book provides a blueprint of what it truly means to be a human being."-- Laurence Miller, Ph.D., author of *Inner Natures* and *Freud's Brain*

About the Author

**Todd E. Feinberg, M.D.** is Associate Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at The Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and Chief of the Betty and Morton Yarmon Division of Neurobehavior and Alzheimer's Disease at the Beth Israel Medical Center in New York.

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