

Bjørn Grinde

The Evolution of Consciousness and How to Make the Most of it

Bevissthet. Forstå hjernen og få et bedre liv

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Consciousness implies an awareness of sensations and a capacity to experience life. To answer the question of why we have this feature, the author proposes the following evolutionary trajectory: nervous systems appeared for the purpose of orchestrating behaviour. As a rule of thumb, the challenges facing an animal concern either approaching an opportunity or avoiding harm. These two options were originally hard-wired as reflexes. Our distant ancestors gained consciousness because they needed to experience feelings in order to weigh positive and negative outcomes; which typically implies deciding between approach or avoidance. The system was a success because it improved the strategy for choosing behavioural options appropriate for the genes.

A range of evidence suggests that the attribute first appeared in the amniotes (the phylogenetic group comprising reptiles, birds and mammals). In the human lineage, the feature expanded to yield the "film of life" we experience; and to include qualities such as self-awareness, advanced cognition, and a level of free will.

Besides offering an understanding of what consciousness is about, the model suggests a strategy for improving the impact it has on our quality of life.

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Bjørn Grinde received his education in natural sciences, psychology, and anthropology from the University of Oslo; ending with a Dr.Scient. (1981) and a Dr.Philos. (1984) in biology. He is presently Chief Scientist at the Division of Mental Health, Norwegian Institute of Public Health. Previously he has served as a scientist and professor at leading universities in Norway, the United States, and Japan. A primary focus of his research has been to understand the process of evolution, particularly how it has formed the human brain and our capacity to enjoy life. He has written several books, including *Darwinian Happiness* (The Darwin Press, 2002; 2nd Edition, 2012); *God — A Scientific Update* (The Darwin Press, 2011); and *The Biology of Happiness* (Springer Verlag, 2012). Together with Professor David Sloan Wilson at Binghamton University, NY, he is engaged in research aimed at practical ways to improve people's quality of life.

Links to Grinde's previous books, as well as selected articles on human behaviour, can be found at grinde.wikispaces.org

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