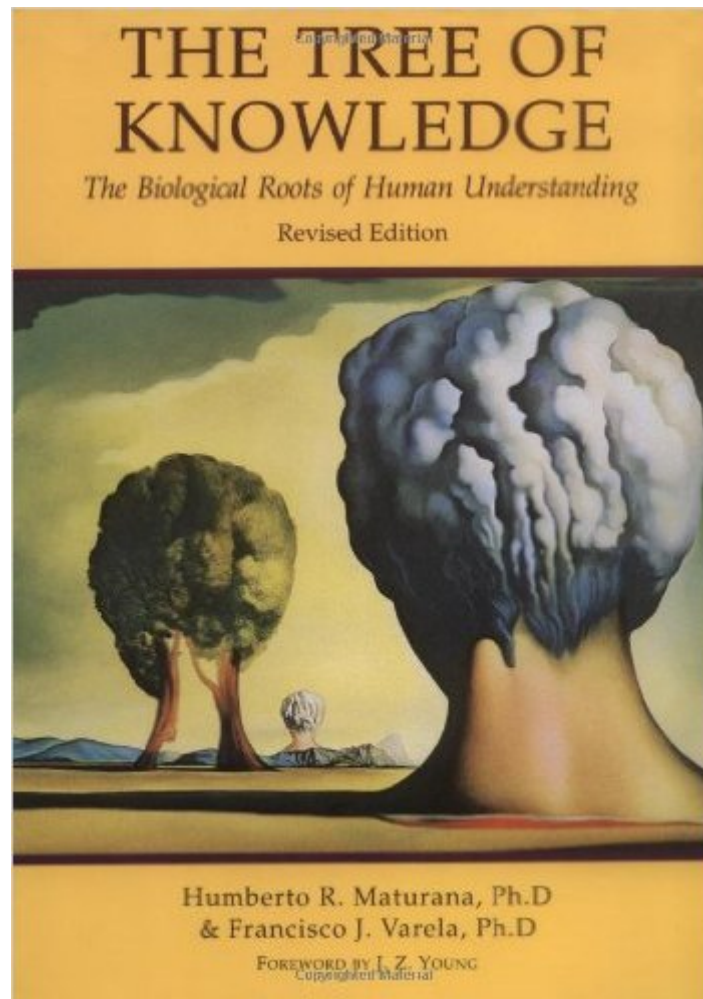


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The Tree Of Knowledge: The Biological Roots Of Human Understanding



Synopsis

"Knowing how we know" is the subject of this book. Its authors present a new view of cognition that has important social and ethical implications, for, they assert, the only world we humans can have is the one we create together through the actions of our coexistence. Written for a general audience as well as for students, scholars, and scientists and abundantly illustrated with examples from biology, linguistics, and new social and cultural phenomena, this revised edition includes a new afterword by Dr. Varela, in which he discusses the effect the book has had in the years since its first publication.

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Customer Reviews

I came to this book years ago through, of all things, a two-year course in business and sales, for which it was required reading along with "Computers and Cognition", another eye-opener; the latter anticipated the current transactional nature of the Internet. You might ask how a work as theoretical and speculative as "Tree of Knowledge" could be part of a pragmatic and hardnosed business course, and that is one key to its attraction for me: as intellectually intriguing as the ideas and assertions in this book are, even more engaging is how they might actually change the way we act in the world. The authors drill down to molecular biology and then carefully build upward their premise that we construct the worlds we live in out of language. Each of us exists inside a story we tell ourselves about the way the world is, and we are completely contained within that story. In that sense, we interact with other people through the way our stories talk to their stories. And the

success of our relationships and the effectiveness with which we act in our world is dependent on how well we can recognize the stories of others and understand the nature of our own story. This is good news, once we recognize it, because we are a narrative species. On my way to work in the morning, I am telling myself a story about the way I want my day to go: what I expect, what I want to accomplish, how I will confront the challenges along the way. The story I tell myself about my life has heroes and villains, goals and challenges, grand themes and petty foibles. The more we understand the soaring, rich, complex stories those around us are telling themselves, the more we can overcome misunderstandings, conflicts and cultural dissonance - the more, in a sense, we can construct a meta-story that serves us all as human beings. This is not a quick and simple read, but it is so logically and carefully laid out that I never felt lost along the journey. It is a wonderful book to read in tandem with a friend, or as part of a book club. The discussion and the "aha!" experiences it prompts make for a lively exploration of its ideas. Part of the joy of "Tree of Knowledge" is its potential for promoting tolerance of those different from us, through recognition of what drives their story rather than through compromising our own values. "ladylucero", in her review, noted that "Tree of Knowledge" is required reading in some American universities. I read that in the authors' native Chile it is even taught in high schools. This, I believe, is good news: the earlier in life we recognize how our individual stories drive our hopes and expectations, our fears and disappointments, the more capable we will be of living well with our fellow human beings.

This book, a foundation piece of "New Thought," is required reading for college courses at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and at California's Humboldt State University. Its reputation is well-deserved. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, two Chilean scientists, lucidly establish HOW we know WHAT we know, as they engage the reader in a series of perceptual experiments designed to present the case for each entity's absolute right to its own "reality." According to Maturana and Varela, an individual's "reality" is constructed from his or her (or its) perceptions, and these perceptions are interactive with the environment. The authors use the graphic analogy of a raindrop which falls on the mountainside and, as it courses downward, both affects and is affected by the slope down which it rolls. That raindrop's experience is its incontrovertible truth, though rain falling on an opposite slope finds quite a different path. Thus, our "reality" is interactive. Moreover, our reality is mutually constructed. Our commonly agreed-upon view of reality is in fact a shared set of assumptions/perceptions. You and I see what we see because we have agreed that this is what is "out there." Together, we bring forth the world we experience as objective reality. The implications of this idea are profound. We cannot afford to scorn another's views, for they are just as valid as our

own, and without them our greater "reality" is incomplete. This compelling book will challenge your assumptions about science and philosophy. But if you stay open to these ideas, you will not see the world, nor your fellow beings, in the same limited way again. And you will more deeply appreciate your own part in bringing forth the dream.

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