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On The Nature Of Higher Consciousness And The Experience Called God

Robert Ornstein

Malor Books (406 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

An acclaimed psychologist's magnum opus.

Stanford University professor Robert Ornstein's 1972 book, *The Psychology of Consciousness*, was the subject of long-form reviews and analysis in the *New Yorker*, *Time*, and other national publications. The groundbreaking work provided fresh, scientifically based answers to how the evolution of the brain and consciousness aligned with human spirituality. Nearly a half-century and dozens of books later, the author, who died in 2018, offers readers this final, posthumously published work—the only one co-written with his wife, Sally. Ornstein notes in the preface that it is “the book I was waiting for,” calling it a “sequel” to his best-known work. He updates his past thesis with later findings in the fields of psychology and neuroscience and further develops his self-described “radical conclusion” that what humanity has “experienced as ‘God’ is a development and extension of consciousness.” From primordial shamans who introduced humanity to the first notion of a deity (or, in the book's parlance, “God 1.0”) to the development of a monotheistic, omnipotent God in Abrahamic religions (“God 3.0”), humans have “tried to transcend normal existence” in a constant endeavor to unravel the mystery of life and death, he asserts. This book carefully balances readability and scientific complexity in its quest to find explanations for the near ubiquity of spirituality in humanity's history, and the author displays a firm command of information regarding world religion, secular history, and cutting-edge science and psychological theory, as evidenced through extensive endnotes. It also tackles distinctly modern questions, such as why does religion make a rational species like *Homo sapiens* “do such weird things?” The book's copious introductory materials are a bit hagiographic in their treatment of Ornstein's legacy, but its main chapters deliver an effective, timely, and apropos conclusion to his published works. Particularly poignant is its final section, which calls for humankind to “move beyond beliefs” and “to bring up our children to identify with humanity itself.”

A fitting final chapter in the canon of an innovative psychologist.

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