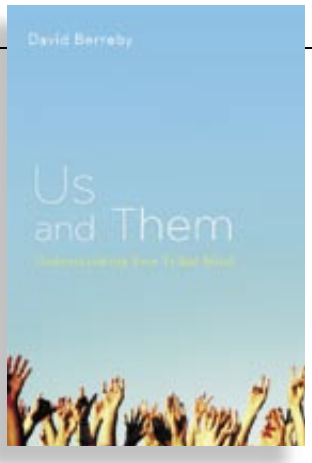
Mind Reads

Putting People into Bins

Us and Them: Understanding Your Tribal Mind

by David Berreby. Little, Brown and Company, 2005 ($26.95)



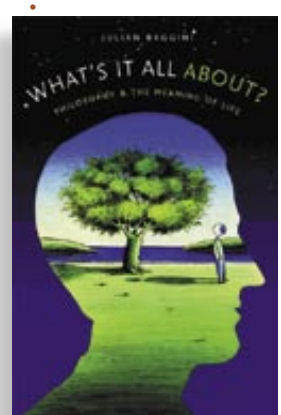
Each of us has experienced a feeling of kinship with someone who shares a love of chocolate, a passion for foreign films, or perhaps an affinity for a person with the same skin color or ethnic identity. We might also feel alienated from someone with the same qualities if he or she belongs to a "group" we do not like.

But what exactly is this seemingly natural tendency to sort others into "kinds"? This question forms the core of *Us and Them,* which explores the conscious and unconscious ways in which people classify one another—and more important—why. How humans can use this propensity constructively, rather than destructively, remains a central issue of our time, argues David Berreby, a veteran science journalist. Although this penchant may be hardwired into our brains, ultimately we choose how to live. Religious strife, political conflict and clan rivalries boil down to individual behavior.

Berreby says the sciences of brain and mind offer "a new way to look at love of country, at culture, at religion (and at hatred too)." Researchers are starting to understand "how and why people think and feel in tribes, and why all of us are capable of *both* tribal good and tribal evil." Advances are allowing scientists to grapple with such questions as "Why can't we all get along?" Berreby investigates the social, psychological and neurological mechanisms that move humans to categorize. For example, he considers how codes in the nervous system predispose us to organize perceptions, including ones that help us feel how other people feel.

Science's assault on our beliefs about race, religion and nationalism has shown that even much of "common sense" is both blind and cruel. Berreby reminds us that not long ago North Americans held by common sense that slavery was natural, women should not vote and only heterosexuals deserved respect. "Good riddance to all that," he says. Still, attitudes die hard. "A white person and a black person in today's New York City can agree over coffee that race is 'all in your mind,'" Berreby contends. "But when they leave Starbucks and raise their hands to hail a taxi, the white person is more likely to get a cab. In that moment, race is as real as gravity."

Given our drive to categorize, Berreby reflects thoughtfully on how to do so responsibly. "The Us-Them code does not own you," he concludes. "You own it." —*Richard Lipkin*



No Higher Purpose

What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life

by Julian Baggini. Oxford University Press, 2005 ($23)

Nearly everyone has at some time wondered why we are here, what the purpose of life is. Julian Baggini's *What's It All About?* begins with these ruminations but shifts to the intimately related question of what makes life valuable and meaningful.

Baggini, founding editor of the *Philosopher's Magazine,* makes the rationalist-humanist assumption that reason and evidence are to be employed in the attempt to understand why we are here. He then proceeds to argue that inquiry into human origins and future human prospects does not reveal a purpose for human existence. Most confrontational to readers may be his skepticism about a God giving purpose to life. Is it plausible, he asks, to suppose that we are here to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28)? Why do we need to do this? And why would an all-powerful God create us to have us serve or worship him? Doesn't that suggest that God is an egotistical tyrant?

The conclusion that life lacks a "higher" purpose is often accompanied by great angst. Without such an overarching direction, life seems worthless. Baggini, however, challenges this view and provides some rough guidelines about what in fact makes life valuable to people. Helping others can give life meaning, insofar as it makes for an uplifted quality of life. Happiness, construed as something other than mere immediate sensual pleasure, is also a good thing. Success in parenting, in one's profession and in leading a morally decent existence can give life direction, too.

There is much to recommend Baggini's book. It is clearly written and reasoned, setting out the sober view that life can be meaningful even if purposeless. The principal shortcomings are those imposed by the genre of popular philosophy—the reader is likely to find that his or her particular views are not given the full attention they deserve. Nor are the author's positive views worked out in much detail. What this means, of course, is that *What's It All About?* is only a starting point for reflection. —*Ken Aizawa*

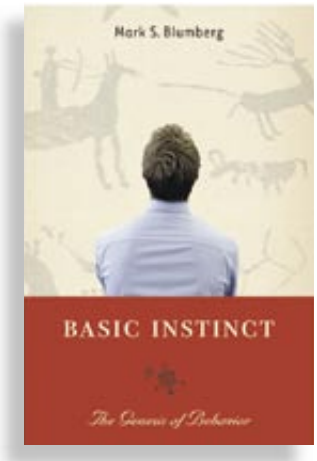
Inborn Contradiction

Basic Instinct: The Genesis of Behavior

by Mark S. Blumberg. Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005 ($24)

What is an instinct? A salmon swims upstream to spawn. A dog herds sheep. These inborn patterns of behavior characteristic to a species seem straightforward enough. Even Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* remarked that "everyone understands what is meant" by an instinct.

Mark S. Blumberg, a neuroscientist at the University of Iowa, is not so convinced about creatures being born knowing how to do something, and he picks apart this notion in *Basic Instinct.* Even Darwin, he notes, became tangled in his own contradictions when he attempted to define and discuss instinct. Blumberg also notes that the issue of inborn knowledge is central to our origins and place on this earth. Do humans alone have the capacity for rational thought—that is, beyond instinctive reactions? Does experience shape instinct, perhaps even before birth? These are not idle questions, he maintains. "At stake is man's privileged place in the animal kingdom and the need to posit a god as the ultimate source of intelligent design."



After hundreds of years of debate, today's prevailing (and opposing) ideologies simultaneously hold that instincts derive either from divine influence or genes, chains of reflexes or nonreflexes, and learned or nonlearned behavior. Blumberg finds it puzzling that so much disagreement—even among scientists—prevails, and the debate over instinct's significance and role in human development has never been more heated. Nativists, he explains, argue that we are born with certain core capacities and knowledge that structure our learning throughout life. Nonnativists contend that the concept of instinct has "outlived its usefulness" and that to apply it to human infant development retards our understanding and learning about the process.

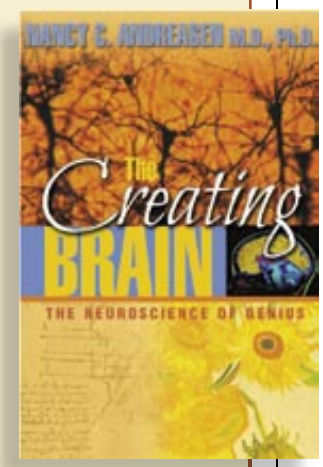
Blumberg ultimately sides with the nonnativists, explaining that too often the knee-jerk invocation of instinct is misleading. He asserts that the term "instinct" is usually just a convenient way to refer to complex, species-typical behaviors that seem to emerge mysteriously out of nowhere. Yet he believes this perspective is "an illusion fostered by the instinct concept." As the sciences of mind, brain, behavior and cognitive development now show, the very concept of instinct, he says, has become "less satisfying as an explanatory tool."

Blumberg's interest in the subject, by the way, may have been cast when he attended a debate between a nativist and a nonnativist. The room, he writes, was packed "with members nodding vociferously when *their* person was talking, and shaking their heads and muttering when it was the opponent's turn." —*Richard Lipkin*

Inspired, If Not Proved

The Creating Brain: The Neuroscience of Genius

by Nancy C. Andreasen. Dana Press, 2005 ($23.95)



What is the nature of creativity? What conditions foster it? What is going on inside the brain of a Mozart or a Shakespeare during the creative process? And is there a relation between creativity and mental illness, as often posited? Science thus far has produced only sketchy answers to these fascinating questions. *The Creating Brain* is a worthwhile inquiry into the subject and a reminder of how little is known.

Nancy C. Andreasen, a psychiatrist and neuroscientist at the University of Iowa who started her career as a Renaissance English scholar, argues that some characteristics of creative people—such as openness to new experiences and sensitivity to sensory inputs—may also make them more prone to mental and emotional problems. Her study of Iowa Writers Workshop participants shows a correlation between mood disorders and creativity, and other scientists have found similar tendencies in studies of literary and artistic types. Such research, however, has not shown a suspected link between artistic creativity and schizophrenic symptoms. Andreasen, who tends to draw conclusions primarily from her own work, notes that she is performing a study to see if any such tendency exists among especially creative scientists.

Despite the paucity of evidence, Andreasen suggests that creativity arises largely from the "association cortex"—parts of the frontal, parietal and temporal lobes that integrate sensory and other information. This idea, however, has just begun to be researched; Andreasen, again, relies heavily on her own study, this one done with positron-emission tomography (PET) scans of people's brains during free association.

In pondering the topic of genius, Andreasen points out that certain historical times and places have produced a bounty of brilliance. Among these "cradles of creativity" she lists ancient Athens, Renaissance Florence and mid- to late 19th-century Paris. Her list of factors spurring creative thought in such places is plausible if unsurprising: intellectual freedom, open competition, a critical mass of creative people, the presence of mentors and patrons, and some degree of economic prosperity.

Andreasen also provides tips for boosting creativity. For adults, she proposes exercises such as making close observations of a chosen item or imagining oneself to be someplace or someone else. Her suggestions for kids are mainly common sense, including less television exposure and more music and outdoor activity. *The Creating Brain* contains much of interest, even if breakthroughs lie mostly in the future.

—*Kenneth Silber*