



# Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are

*By Joseph LeDoux*

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**Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are** By Joseph LeDoux

In 1996 Joseph LeDoux's **The Emotional Brain** presented a revelatory examination of the biological bases of our emotions and memories. Now, the world-renowned expert on the brain has produced with a groundbreaking work that tells a more profound story: how the little spaces between the neurons—the brain's synapses—are the channels through which we think, act, imagine, feel, and remember. Synapses encode the essence of personality, enabling each of us to function as a distinctive, integrated individual from moment to moment. Exploring the functioning of memory, the synaptic basis of mental illness and drug addiction, and the mechanism of self-awareness, **Synaptic Self** is a provocative and mind-expanding work that is destined to become a classic.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

A middle-aged neuroscientist walking down Bourbon Street spots a T-shirt that reads, "I don't know, so maybe I'm not." This stimulus zooms from eyes to brain, neuron by neuron, via tiny junctions called synapses. The results? An immediate chuckle and (sometime later) a groundbreaking book titled *The Synaptic Self*. To Joseph LeDoux, the simple question, "What makes us who we are?" represents the driving force behind his 20-plus years of research into the cognitive, emotional, and motivational functions of the brain.

LeDoux believes the answer rests in the synapses, key players in the brain's intricately designed communication system. In other words, the pathways by which a person's "hardwired" responses (nature) mesh with his or her unique life experiences (nurture) determine that person's individuality. Here, LeDoux nimbly compresses centuries of philosophy, psychology, and biology into an amazingly clear picture of humanity's journey toward understanding the self.

Equally readable is his comprehensive science lesson, where detailed circuit speak reads like an absorbing--yet often humorous--mystery novel. Skillfully presenting research studies and findings alongside their various implications, LeDoux makes a solid case for accepting a synaptic explanation of existence and provides to the reader generous helpings of knowledge, amusement, and awe along the way. --*Liane Thomas*

#### From Publishers Weekly

Despite ongoing debate about the root cause of psychological disorders, most agree that the development of the self is central to the distinction between normality and psychopathology. Yet neuroscientists have been slow to probe the biological basis for our sense of self, focusing instead on states of consciousness. LeDoux (*The Emotional Brain*), professor at New York University's Center for Neural Sciences, has come up with a theory: it's the neural pathways the synaptic relationships in our brains that make us who we are. Starting with a description of basic neural anatomy (including how neurons communicate, the brain's embryological development and some of the key neural pathways), LeDoux reviews experiments and research, arguing that the brain's synaptic connections provide the biological base for memory, which makes possible the sense of continuity and permanence fundamental to a "normal" conception of self. Writing for a general audience, he succeeds in making his subject accessible to the dedicated nonspecialist. He offers absorbing descriptions of some of the most fascinating case studies in his field, provides insight into the shortcomings of psychopharmacology and suggests new directions for research on the biology of mental illness. While some may disagree with LeDoux's conclusion that "the brain makes the self" through its synapses, he makes an important contribution to the literature on the relationship between these two entities. Agents, Katinka Matson and John Brockman. (On-sale: Jan. 14)

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#### From Library Journal

Brain/mind theorists tread upon sensitive territory when they address the issue of personality. Many will readily concede that the activities of the mind result from physical process in the brain, but they find a purely material explanation of selfhood troubling. LeDoux (Ctr. for Neural Sciences, New York Univ.; *The Emotional Brain*) puts forth a new, unified theory in which neurology shapes experience and vice versa. The

critical locus is the synapses, which convey information and stimulate functions within the brain. The interconnections of the synapses are plastic, shaped by a person's experiences, and thus give rise to unique thoughts and feelings. Memory arises from these, creating a sense of self and personality. LeDoux is not the first to discuss the role of memory in selfhood (see, for instance, Daniel Schacter's *Searching for Memory*); nor is he the first to stress the importance of synaptic firing in brain/mind interactions (see Gerald Edelman's *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire*). He does, however, bring together these pieces to render a convincingly integrated theory. It will be of vital interest to those in the field and to informed lay readers who have followed the debates. Gregg Sapp, Science Lib., SUNY at Albany  
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