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Astin, Alexander W. (2007) *Mindworks: Becoming More Conscious in an Unconscious World*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

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Anyone who references Thich Nhat Hanh, Ken Wilber, Thomas Mann, and Albert Einstein in the same book has my attention. In his new book, *Mindworks: Becoming more conscious in an unconscious world*, UCLA emeritus professor of psychology Alexander W. Astin explores the role of consciousness and feelings in our everyday experience.

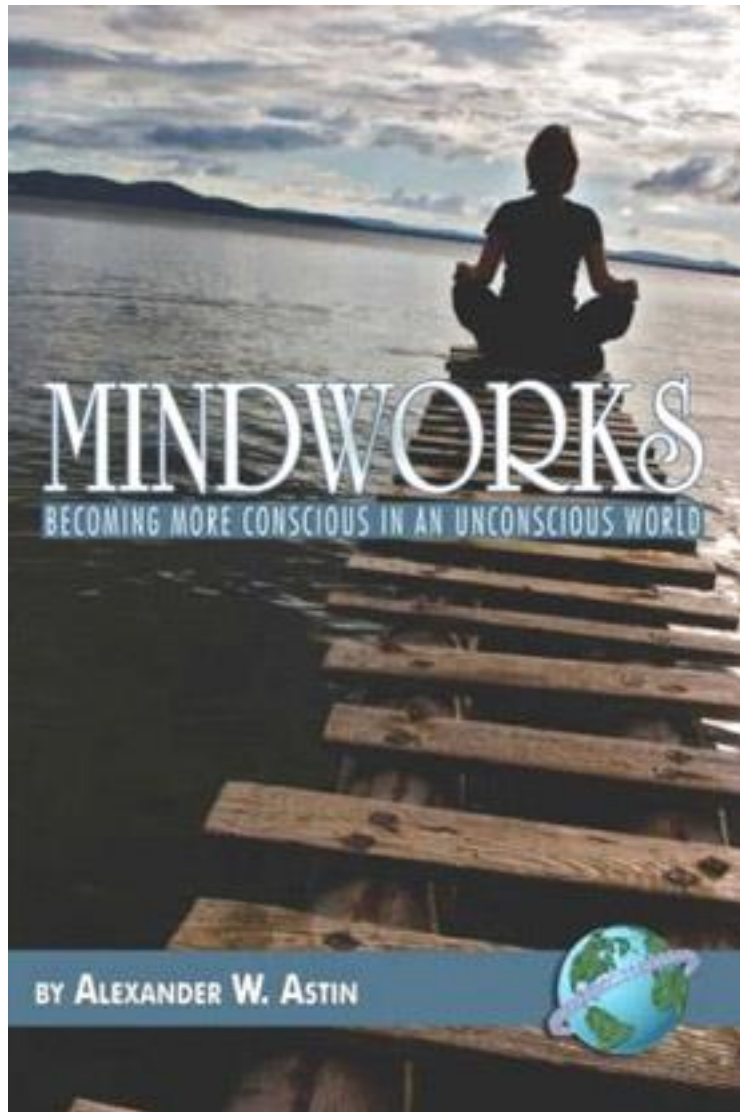
The major contribution of this book, in my view, is Astin's painstaking examination of affect. He undertook the task of going through the dictionary to identify every feeling word, and discovered over one thousand. Astin then categorized the feeling words in continua based on similarity or opposition. For human service or mental health professionals and students in such fields, this is quite helpful. Astin positions this exploration of emotions within the context of conscious awareness; that is, our feelings play a primary role in our daily lives, and our consciousness of exactly what we are feeling is necessary in order for us to either appreciate our in-the-moment experience or to make any change to an unsatisfactory experience.

The initial chapters of the book introduce some of the key thinking about consciousness from an Eastern perspective; particularly the contributions of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh and contemporary explorations of mindfulness with Jon Kabat-Zinn. The larger philosophical perspective of Ken Wilber is also present. A nod is given to traditional psychoanalytic perspectives on the role of the unconscious, but this is not explored in any depth. In fact, I found it surprising that C.G. Jung's later work was not integrated with Astin's thinking in this book, given Jung's exploration beyond the confines of narrow psychoanalytic (ie Freudian) perspectives of that era. Jung explored the mystical aspects of experience subsequent to his travels to India, connecting both spirituality and a broader conception of the unconscious, and this is not irrelevant to Astin's subject.

In early chapters Astin explores the role of beliefs and their power in determining our experience. He posits a formula for our interpretation of our own experience: beliefs plus experience (an event) lead to our analysis of the event (via our beliefs) which result in an emotion or emotions (reaction). This is highly reminiscent of Albert Ellis'

voluminous work on Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), although Astin does not reference Ellis nor any other cognitive-behavioral theorists, a seemingly obvious connection. Astin suggests "Your beliefs to a certain extent 'create your reality'" (p. 39). This is very much in line with cognitive and cognitive-behavioral perspectives in psychotherapy. Astin does not explain from whence the beliefs in step one of his model come, which is an outstanding question in my mind.

Similarly in Astin's discussion of beliefs, the suggestion of post-modern theorists' influence on his thinking is clear, in that he acknowledges the phenomenological world of multiple truths and subjective realities. The allusion to social constructionism is present (most simply stated, that our reality is socially constructed), but no specific mention is made of any post-modern or social constructionist theorists and their contributions (such as Kenneth Gergen; or from the feminist theoretical perspective, Laura Brown or Jean Baker Miller). Likewise, the role of conceptual frameworks is noted in chapter 2 without actually referencing the relevant contributions of numerous cognitive researchers (George Lakoff and his 1987 book, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* jumps to mind), nor of the role of prototypes in conceptual thinking.





Alexander W. Astin

Throughout the book, Astin includes “thought” exercises for the reader to underscore what has been presented in a particular section. These exercises are clear and well-constructed. Diligent readers will find these helpful, both for professionals and for those seeking self-help. Multiple exercises per chapter offer many opportunities to personalize the concepts presented.

Mindworks seems to contain two books: one is a book about feelings, nestled within the beginnings of a larger, more conceptual book about consciousness. The former is exhaustively explored and constructed in a logical, useful fashion. The latter seems less complete, conceivably the beginnings of a comprehensive exploration of consciousness (if such a thing could be undertaken). In this latter frame I would have liked to see more extensive exploration of Eastern thought as is hinted at in early chapters, perhaps through reference to

the numerous works of Buddhist nun Pema Chodron, or Tara Brach (particularly her excellent book, *Radical Acceptance*), Eckhart Tolle (who wrote *The Power of Now*, among others) or many other notable writers in this field.

The foundering focus of the conceptual piece of *Mindworks* may also be due to a fairly generic conceptualization of who the audience for the book might be. In the preface, Astin positions the book as for a general audience seeking to improve their lives; so in a sense, this is a self-help book. However, rather than the typical lay reader, the book seems to assume a highly educated audience – for example, Husserl is mentioned, as if all readers would be familiar with Husserl’s heady philosophy, but no actual reference is given. In chapter 6, Astin alludes to motivation in a manner very reminiscent of Norcross and Prochaska’s popular “stages of change” model (also known as the Transtheoretical Model of Change), and a further exploration of this model would be very appropriate if the goal is to assist a self-help readership.

This leads me to my major concern about *Mindworks*. As a faculty member, I spend many hours teaching graduate students about citation. I tell my students that there are two primary reasons for citation: first, to give credit where credit is due (and thus to avoid charges of plagiarism); and second, to give the interested reader enough information to easily pursue further inquiry if s/he so chooses. *Mindworks* has a short reference list of 23 publications, and these are rarely cited in the text. While three of Ken Wilber’s works are listed, oddly enough his influential work, *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, is not; although the influence of this particular book of Wilber’s seems obvious here. As noted above, the cognitive behavioral approach appears to be intimately connected to Astin’s ideas, but there are no citations to bear this out. These are just a few examples of ideas absent citation that left me troubled in reading *Mindworks*. A previous faculty member I was fortunate to have during my doctoral studies once said that there are no original ideas, and thus citation is of critical importance. While I don’t quite believe that there are no original ideas, I do believe in thorough citation for the reasons noted above. I would have enjoyed adding more books to my “must read” list as I am very intrigued by the topics introduced in *Mindworks*.

A more minor, cosmetic concern is that each chapter has at least a handful of proofreading errors – missing words, typos, or misspelled words – that create a rocky road for the reader. Likewise, there is a wide variety of fonts and type sizes on many pages that distract from the actual content.

Despite the reservations I have noted, I did enjoy reading *Mindworks* and I would recommend it for students in the helping professions for its exhaustive treatment of feelings and the role that emotions play in our daily experience. The curious reader may become intrigued by the multiple dimensions of conscious awareness and the possibility of gaining more control over their daily

experience, and will hopefully read further in other publications to round out their understanding of the possibilities for change. Astin's sagacity shines throughout the book, and his positioning of feelings as central to our experience is both illuminating and validating to those in the helping professions.

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