

‘The Idea of the Brain’: Book explores the struggle to understand the human brain

Neuroscientists love a good metaphor. Through the years, plumbing, telegraph wires and computers have all been enlisted to help explain how the [brain](#) operates, neurobiologist and historian Matthew Cobb writes in *The Idea of the Brain*. And like any metaphor, those approximations all fall short.

Cobb leads a fascinating tour of how concepts of the [brain](#) have morphed over time. His writing is clear, thoughtful and, when called for, funny.

...

Like a computer, the brain’s main job is to process information. But some experts argue that because brains are biological — they evolved within the vagaries of a body — they [operate in ways that a machine doesn’t](#).

Cobb reckons that, among other reasons, the mere existence of such objections is a harbinger of the end of the computer metaphor. But that doesn’t mean the comparison was a waste. Metaphors clarify thoughts.

...

He ends the book with a creative exercise in looking ahead to what the future might hold. The possibilities include the creation of conscious machines, or even having to accept that there is no brain theory to be found. Still, “our current ignorance should not be viewed as a sign of defeat,” Cobb writes, “but as a challenge.”

[Read the original post](#)