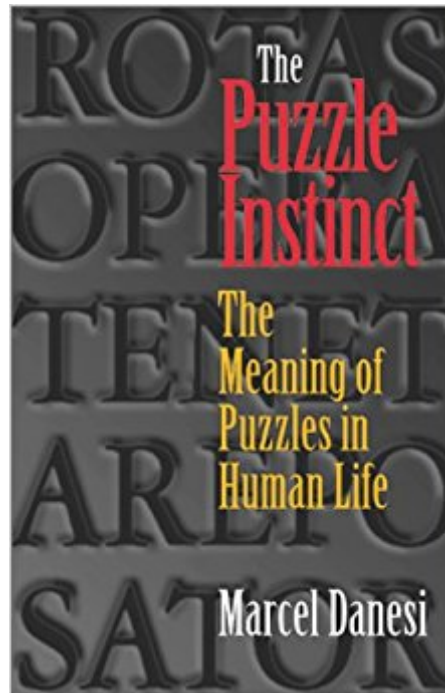




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# The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning Of Puzzles In Human Life



## Synopsis

One of the most famous anagrams of all time was constructed in the Middle Ages. The unknown author contrived it as a Latin dialogue between Pilate and Jesus. Jesus's answer to Pilate's question "What is truth" is phrased as an ingenious anagram of the letters of that very question: Pilate: Quid est veritas? ("What is truth?") Jesus: Est vir qui adest. ("It is the man before you.") The origin of anagrams is shrouded in mystery. One thing is clear, however, in the ancient world, they were thought to contain hidden messages from the gods. Legend has it that even Alexander the Great (356–323 b.c.) believed in their prophetic power. —from Chapter Two

The most obvious explanation for the popularity of puzzles is that they provide a form of constructive entertainment. But in *The Puzzle Instinct* Marcel Danesi contends that the fascination with puzzles throughout the ages suggests something much more profound. Puzzles serve a deeply embedded need in people to make sense of things. Emerging at the same time in human history as myth, magic, and the occult arts, the puzzle instinct, he claims, led to discoveries in mathematics and science, as well as revolutions in philosophical thought. Puzzles fill an existential void by providing "small-scale experiences of the large-scale questions that Life poses. The puzzle instinct is, arguably, as intrinsic to human nature as is humor, language, art, music, and all the other creative faculties that distinguish humanity from all other species."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Twenty-five years ago, there was a boom in sales of a fist-sized ingenious contraption of plastic, a fractured cube of multi-colored sides, the pieces of which could be twisted so that all the six faces

had different colors (easy) or back to the one configuration where each face had only its own color (hard). The ubiquitous Rubik's Cube came and went (well, it is a puzzle classic in its simplicity; you can still buy it, but the fad is gone), but there will be some other puzzle fad not long from now. The urge to figure out puzzles seems to be as ingrained in human personality as the urge to make language or art. In *The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life* (Indiana University Press), Marcel Danesi, a professor of semiotics and anthropology, tries to figure out the meta-puzzle: life has lots of mysteries and complications. Why should we want to manufacture more? Danesi's book turns out to be a spirited review of puzzle history, and the history is a long one. The *Ahmes Papyrus*, nearly four thousand years old, is one of the earliest surviving documents of civilization anywhere, and is essentially a series of mathematical puzzles. It is significant that its title is *Directions for Attaining Knowledge of All Dark Things*. Charlemagne, the founder of the Holy Roman Empire, had a puzzle-maker on staff, and King Louis XIII of France had a Royal Anagrammatist. A description of Rubik's Cube is included, of course, as well as many other puzzle fads. The popularity of crossword puzzles is undimmed since they were introduced in the *New York World* in 1913; the original one is reproduced here. Crosswords became an overnight sensation, and many people still have to do their crossword puzzle every day.

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