

## **The Difference that Self-Consciousness Makes**

**Lynne Rudder Baker**

With all the attention given to the study of consciousness recently, the topic of *self*-consciousness has been relatively neglected. “It is of course [phenomenal] consciousness rather than...self-conscious that has seemed such a scientific mystery,” a prominent philosopher comments.<sup>1</sup> Phenomenal consciousness concerns the aspect of a state that *feels* a certain way: roses smell like *this*; garlic tastes like *that*; middle C sounds like *this*, and so on. Although phenomenal consciousness is surely a fruitful area of scientific investigation, I hope to demonstrate here that investigation of self-consciousness offers its own rewards, ontologically speaking.

My aim here is two-fold. First, I want to show that self-consciousness is what distinguishes persons from everything else. Second, and more controversially, I want to argue that, not only is self-consciousness definitive of us persons, but also that self-consciousness makes an ontological difference. By an ‘ontological difference,’ I mean a difference in the inventory of the world. The coming-into-being of a new person is the coming-into-being of a new kind of entity; it is not just a change in an already-existing entity. I shall begin by discussing consciousness and self-consciousness; then I shall give a very brief account of my view of persons as necessarily self-conscious. Although we human persons are the only kind of thing that we know to be self-conscious, on my view, anything that is self-conscious—Martians, computers, or whatever—is a person. Next, I shall discuss a view of human persons that opposes my view. (The opposing view is called ‘Animalism;’ I call my preferred view ‘the Constitution View.’) Finally, I shall discuss and defend the claim that the difference that self-consciousness makes is an ontological difference.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ned Block, “On a Confusion About a Function of Consciousness,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 18 (1995): 227-247. Quotation is on p. 230.

## Consciousness and Self-Consciousness

Many kinds of nonhuman animals, I think, are conscious: they feel pain, they spit out the medicine with apparent distaste. As subjects of experience, conscious beings not only feel things, but they perceive the world from certain points of view, from which things seem one way or another to them. Experience is perspectival. For example, the dog digs there (in the garden) rather than here (by the house), because she saw you bury the bone there in the garden and she wants it. A conscious being has a certain perspective on its surroundings with itself as “origin.” If the dog could speak, she might say: “There’s a bone buried over there, and I want it.” This fragment of a practical syllogism would explain the dog’s problem-solving behavior in terms of its perspectival attitudes. The dog has her own point of view that we can identify by attributing the word ‘I’ to the dog. But this use of ‘I’ does not indicate that the dog is self-conscious.

Merely sentient beings, like dogs (that are conscious without being self-conscious) have subjective perspectives, but they are not aware of themselves as having subjective perspectives. Dogs may have beliefs and desires (simple ones, anyway); but they cannot think of themselves as having beliefs and desires. They may have points of view (e.g., “danger in that direction”), but they cannot conceive of themselves as subjects of such thoughts. Nonhuman animals, like persons, can have conscious experience of their environments (e.g., that there’s danger over there). But persons, unlike nonhuman animals (as far as we can tell), also can have conscious experience of their thoughts and attitudes (e.g., that they are hoping that there’s no danger over there).

To be self-conscious, a being must not only have a perspective, but also must realize that she has a perspective. To be self-conscious, a being must not only be able consciously to experience things, but must also realize that she experiences things. Merely to have a perspective, or to be a subject of experience, is not enough. One must be able to recognize that one is a subject of experience; one must be able to think of oneself as oneself. One must be able to think of one’s thoughts as one’s own, and to have immediate access to her thoughts in that she can know without evidence that she is entertaining a thought that so-and-so.

There are several kinds of self-consciousness, from the simple realization that if I don't get some food soon I shall starve to death to the sophisticated project of constructing a narrative self. Underlying all these forms of self-consciousness is what I call *the first-person perspective*. The first-person perspective—itsself sufficient for the simplest kind of self-consciousness—is the defining characteristic of all persons, human or not.<sup>2</sup> To have a first-person perspective, one must not only be able to distinguish between oneself and other things (as perhaps chimpanzees can be taught to do),<sup>3</sup> but also to conceptualize the distinction between oneself and everything else. One must have a first-person concept of oneself.

In English, the ability to conceive of oneself as oneself is marked grammatically by a sentence with a first-person subject of a psychological or linguistic verb and an embedded first-person reference.<sup>4</sup> English speakers not only use first-person pronouns to refer to ourselves (e.g., “I’m happy”), but also to attribute to ourselves first-person reference (e.g., “I wonder whether I’ll be happy in 10 years”). The second occurrence of ‘I’ in “I wonder whether I’ll be happy in 10 years” directs attention to the person per se, without recourse to any name, description or third-person referential device to identify who is being thought about. Use of first-person pronouns embedded in sentences with linguistic or psychological verbs—e.g., “I wonder how I’ll die,” or “I promise that I’ll stay with you”—provides linguistic evidence of a first-person perspective.

It is only from a first-person perspective that one can evaluate one’s goals, or take responsibility for what one has done, or entertain thoughts about oneself as oneself. If I wonder whether I’ll be happy in ten years, I am wondering about myself as myself—not myself as a philosophy professor, or a married woman, or as LB. From a first-person perspective, I do not need to pick myself out as one object among many. I could still

---

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account, see Chapter 3 of *Persons and Bodies* and my “The First-Person Perspective: A Test for Naturalism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35 (1998): 327-348.

<sup>3</sup> See Gordan Gallup, Jr., “Self-Recognition in Primates: A Comparative Approach to Bidirectional Properties of Consciousness,” *American Psychologist* 32 (1977): 329-38.

<sup>4</sup> Hector-Neri Castañeda developed this idea in several papers. See Hector-Neri Castañeda, “He: A Study in the Logic of Self-Consciousness,” *Ratio* 8 (1966): 130-157 and “Indicators and Quasi-Indicators,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1967): 85-100. For a study of philosophy from a first-person point of view, see Gareth B. Matthews, *Thought’s Ego in Augustine and Descartes* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

have this thought even if I had total amnesia. The first-person perspective opens up a distinction between thinking of myself as myself, on the one hand, and thinking of myself as Lynne Baker, or as the person who is writing this paper, on the other. The first-person perspective is the ability to consider oneself as oneself in this way. This is the basis of all forms of self-consciousness.

Although many nonhuman animals are conscious and are subjects of many intentional states, they lack the first-person perspective that allows them to know that they are subjects of intentional states. There are many kinds of intentional states that only a being with a first-person perspective can have—namely, those that require one as the thinker to conceive of oneself as oneself. A squirrel, lacking a first-person perspective from which it can think about itself qua itself, cannot assess its goals. It cannot consider whether stockpiling nuts really is the task that it should undertake; nor can a squirrel hope that it has enough nuts to get through the winter. If a dog, *per impossibile*, came to have a first-person perspective, then the dog would come to constitute a canine person. If a gorilla (like Koko?) were taught a language sufficiently close to English that we could recognize embedded first-person references, then that gorilla would come to constitute an ape person. Anything that has a first-person perspective is a person.

So, what distinguishes human persons from animals is not consciousness; nor is it the ability to have intentional states like fearing or desiring. The ability to have intentional states is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for being a person. To be a person—whether God, an angel, a human person, a Martian person, an artificial person—one must have a first-person perspective.

### **The Constitution View of Persons**

The Constitution View of persons aims to recognize our animal natures without taking us to be identical to animals. Human persons are *persons* in virtue of their capacity for self-consciousness; they are *human* in virtue of being constituted by human bodies (i.e., human animals).

First, consider the notion of a capacity for self-consciousness. A being has a capacity for self-consciousness (of the relevant kind) if it has the structural properties required for a first-person perspective, and either is in an environment conducive to the development and maintenance of a first-person perspective, or has manifested a first-person perspective at some time in the past. These conditions allow for a person to begin existence at or near birth, and to continue to exist in a coma as long as the structural (e.g., neural) properties remain intact. The conditions for personhood are metaphysical, not epistemological. We may well not know whether a particular being is a person or not.<sup>5</sup>

Second, consider the idea of constitution. The guiding idea of this view of persons is that we are constituted by human animals—just as (certain) statues are constituted by pieces of marble. But since the pieces of marble could have existed without constituting statues, and the human animals could have existed without constituting us, the statues are not identical to the pieces of marble; nor are we identical to the animals that constitute us. The piece of marble did not constitute a statue before it reached the sculptor’s workshop. Since the same piece of marble that constitutes the statue now did not constitute the statue before the sculptor saw it, the statue is not identical to the piece of marble. Similarly, when the organism that constitutes me now was an embryo, I did not exist. Since the same organism that constitutes me now did not constitute me at some other time (when it was an embryo), I am not identical to that organism. Identity is necessary; constitution is contingent.

Constitution is a relation intermediate between identity and separate existence.<sup>6</sup> I have gone to some lengths elsewhere to give a technical account of the notion that absolves it of charges of incoherence and obscurity.<sup>7</sup> Here I just want to give an

---

<sup>5</sup> In that case, we should err on the side of personhood. However, there is no question that a human animal without a neocortex fails to have the structural properties required for a first-person perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Any believer in the Christian Trinity is committed to there being some such relation. I’m not suggesting that a believer in the Christian Trinity will endorse constitution as I construe it; rather, a Christian is in no position to reject my view on the grounds that the idea of a relation between identity and separate existence is incoherent. I define ‘having separate existence at t’ in “On Making Things Up: Constitution and its Critics,” *Philosophical Topics*, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> See *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and in “Unity Without Identity: A New Look at Material Constitution,” *New Directions in Philosophy*, Midwest Studies in Philosophy 23, Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1999): 144-165. I have given a completely general definition of ‘x constitutes y at t.’

informal description. On the one hand, we need constitution to be similar to identity in order to account for the fact that if  $x$  constitutes  $y$  at  $t$ , then  $x$  and  $y$  have many of the same properties at  $t$ . For example, if a particular 6-foot piece of pink marble constitutes a statue, then the statue and the piece of marble are located in exactly the same place; and the statue, as well as the piece of marble, is 6-foot and pink. If the statue is worth a million dollars at a certain time, then so is the piece of marble. (The statue is pink wholly in virtue of being constituted by a piece of marble that is pink; hence the statue has the property of being pink *derivatively*. The piece of marble is worth a million dollars wholly in virtue of constituting a statue; hence the piece of marble has the property of being worth a million dollars *derivatively*. In general, if  $x$  constitutes  $y$  at  $t$ ,  $x$  borrows some of its properties at  $t$  from  $y$ , and  $y$  borrows some of its properties at  $t$  from  $x$ .) On the other hand, we need constitution *not* to be the same relation as identity in order to account for the fact that that piece of marble might have existed without ever constituting a statue. A certain piece of marble might have remained in the quarry and never have constituted a statue, even if in fact it does constitute a statue now. Similarly, a certain human organism might have miscarried and never have constituted a person, even if in fact it does constitute you (a person) now.

According to the Constitution View, the relation between a human person and her body (the relation that I am calling ‘constitution’) is exactly the same as the relation between a statue and the piece of marble that makes it up. Nothing that is a statue could exist in a world without art; nothing that is a person could exist in a world without self-consciousness. The difference between a piece of marble and a marble statue is the relation to an artworld (or, perhaps, to an artist’s intentions); the difference between a human body and a person is self-consciousness. When a piece of marble is suitably related to an artworld, a new thing—a statue—comes into existence. When a human body develops self-consciousness, a new thing—a person—comes into existence. The human body does not thereby go out of existence—any more than the piece of marble goes out of existence when it comes to constitute a statue. Moreover, a human person is as material as Michelangelo’s *David* is. When a human body comes to constitute a

---

Here I’ll drop the reference to time when no confusion will ensue. I have a revised definition in “Replies,”

person, the body has the property of being a person derivatively (in virtue of constituting something that is a person nonderivatively); and the person has the property of being a body derivatively (in virtue of being constituted by something that is a body nonderivatively).

There is much more to be said about the idea of having properties derivatively, but to pursue that topic here would take us too far afield. From now on, I shall omit the qualifier ‘nonderivative.’ Unless otherwise noted, when I say ‘person’ or ‘body’ or ‘human animal,’ I mean things that have the properties of being a person or a body or a human animal nonderivatively—i.e., without regard to their constitution relations. And when I speak of the bearer of a property, I shall mean something that has the property nonderivatively.

The property of having a capacity for self-consciousness is a property that persons—like you and me—have essentially. The property of being organic is a property that human bodies have essentially. On the other hand, you and I, being constituted by human animals, have the property of being organic contingently. (If our organic parts were gradually replaced with bionic parts, then we persons would still exist, but we would no longer be constituted by organic bodies.) So, you are a person essentially, and organic contingently; and the human body that constitutes you is organic essentially, and a person contingently. You and I have our persistence conditions in virtue of being self-conscious; our bodies have their persistence conditions in virtue of their organic properties. (Persistence conditions are the conditions under which a thing continues to exist.)

The persistence conditions of animals—all animals, human or not—are biological; and the persistence conditions of persons—all persons, human or not—are not biological.<sup>8</sup> Persistence conditions determine ontological kinds: If *x* and *y* have different persistence conditions, then *x* and *y* are of different ontological kinds. So, on the Constitution View, *person* is an ontological kind defined by self-consciousness. Human persons are constituted by human bodies; Martian persons (if any) are constituted by, say,

---

*Philosophy and Philosophical Research* 64 (2002): 623-635.

green-slime bodies. But human persons and Martian persons are essentially self-conscious, and only contingently do they have the kinds of bodies that they have. I am ontologically more similar to a Martian person than I am to a human embryo. According to the Constitution View, self-conscious beings—persons, whether human, Martian or something else—make up an ontologically distinctive category.

Let me explain what I mean by saying that *person* is an ontologically distinctive category. Contrast the proposition that something is a person in virtue of being self-conscious with the proposition that someone is a wife in virtue of being a married female. Necessarily, if *x* is a wife, then *x* is a married female. But it does not follow that if *x* is a wife, then necessarily, *x* is a married female. I am a wife, but I might have been single; I am not a wife essentially. According to the Constitution View, being a person is not like being a wife. A new person (i.e., a new self-conscious being) is a new entity in the universe; a new wife is just a change in an already-existing entity.

The reason that persons are an ontologically distinctive kind of entity is that the first-person perspective (self-consciousness) brings into being a new kind of reality: the reality of what we might call ‘inner lives.’ The subjectivity of non-self-conscious consciousness is a step in this direction, but consciousness that is not self-conscious is not sufficient for the rich inner lives that persons have. The subjectivity of persons is not just a matter of experiencing “qualia,” but of experiencing stretches of narrative coherence. We not only react to stimuli from the environment; we evaluate possible courses of action. Unlike entities that are conscious without being self-conscious, we can evaluate our own motives. The property of self-consciousness that enabled Augustine to write his *Confessions* is, as far as we know, unique in the universe. Inanimate objects do not have it; nonhuman animals do not have it.<sup>9</sup> Self-consciousness makes us human persons the kind of beings that we are.

Self-consciousness is ontologically but not biologically distinctive. Biologically speaking, human animals are closer to chimpanzees than chimpanzees are to other

---

<sup>8</sup> For an extended defense of this claim, see *Persons and Bodies*.

<sup>9</sup> Chimpanzees come close. I discuss this point in Ch. 3 of *Persons and Bodies*. See also Gordon Gallup, Jr., “Self-Recognition in Primates.”



nonhuman primates. Even if not biologically significant, self-consciousness expands the field of reality. According to the Constitution View, the difference that self-consciousness makes is to define a new category of being. Persons are as different from human animals as statues are from pieces of marble.

So, according to the Constitution View, human persons are constituted by human bodies in the same way that marble statues are constituted by pieces of marble; and what makes something a person is self-consciousness.

### **The Animalist View vs. The Constitution View**

The claim that self-consciousness makes an ontological difference in the world is not a popular one. With the emphasis on biology today, many philosophers find it overwhelmingly plausible to hold that, ontologically speaking, we are animals, period. “Sure,” they may say, “We are self-conscious, but self-consciousness is just a property that some animals have during some parts of their existence. Being self-conscious is like being a wife; just as a wife is not ipso facto an ontologically different kind of thing from a non-wife, so to a self-conscious being is not ipso facto an ontologically different kind of thing from a non-self-conscious being. We are most fundamentally organisms,” say these philosophers. “We have the persistence conditions of human organisms. We persist as long as the organisms that we are persist; self-consciousness has nothing to do with it.”

Let us call those who espouse such a view “Animalists.” According to Animalism, the kinds of properties that make us the kind of beings that we are our biological properties—the properties that figure into the taxonomy of biological theories. Animalists would regard the properties that we have in virtue of being animals as determining the kind of beings that we are. It follows from Animalism that, in contrast to the Constitution View, persons are not essentially self-conscious. Animalists cannot hold that persons are essentially self-conscious, for this reason: if persons have the persistence conditions of human animals, as Animalists all hold, then persons are essentially human animals; and if persons are essentially human animals, then persons cannot also essentially be self-conscious. Since there are human animals that are not self-conscious (e.g., an early-term human fetus), human animals cannot be essentially self-conscious.

The difference between Animalism and the Constitution View is stark. According to the Constitution View, we are essentially self-conscious and contingently animals; according to Animalism, we are essentially animals and contingently self-conscious. On the Constitution View, if there are nonhuman persons, then they are ontologically like us; they have first-person perspectives that determine their persistence conditions. On the Animalist View, if there are nonhuman persons, they are ontologically different from us; they have the persistence conditions of whatever they are made of. Suppose that there were a Martian person (a self-conscious being), with very different internal mechanisms from humans. A Constitutionalist would hold that I am ontologically more similar to that Martian person than I am to a groundhog (an organism without self-consciousness). An Animalist would hold that I am ontologically more similar to a groundhog than I am to that Martian person.<sup>10</sup>

According to Animalism, what makes us the kind of beings that we are are our biological properties (metabolism, etc.), and a person's continued existence depends on the continued functioning of biological processes. According to the Constitution View, what makes us the kind of beings that we are is our capacity for self-consciousness and a person's continued existence depends on its continued capacity for self-consciousness.<sup>11</sup> Relatedly, an Animalist holds that the persistence conditions of human persons reside in the continuation of their biological functions.<sup>12</sup> A prominent Animalist, Eric Olson, puts the matter sharply: "What it takes for us to persist through time is what I have called *biological continuity*: one survives just in case one's purely animal functions—metabolism, the capacity to breathe and circulate one's blood, and the like—continue."<sup>13</sup>

Here is the contrast: According to Animalism, self-consciousness is ontologically irrelevant. According to the Constitution View, self-consciousness is ontologically

---

<sup>10</sup> An Animalist might well hold that I am *psychologically* more similar to a Martian person than to a groundhog, but from an Animalist point of view, psychological similarities are ontologically irrelevant.

<sup>11</sup> For a Constitutionalist account of our persistence conditions, see Ch. 5 of *Persons and Bodies*.

<sup>12</sup> There are several versions of Animalism. Some Animalists hold that a human animal ceases to exist when it ceases functioning (i.e., at death). Other Animalists hold that a dead animal is still an animal. For the first version, see Eric T. Olson, *The Human Animal: Personal Identity Without Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For the second version, see Fred Feldman, *Confrontations with the Reaper* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). But whatever persistence conditions animals have, we persons have the same ones, according to Animalism.

significant: Two possible worlds as alike as possible, except that one contains self-conscious beings and the other contains no beings that are self-conscious, are *not* ontologically on a par. According to the Constitution View, the difference that self-consciousness makes is thus an ontological difference. A self-conscious being is a fundamentally different kind of thing from anything else in the world.

The Constitutionalist holds that development of self-consciousness in a human organism should be understood in terms of that organism's coming to constitute a new entity—a person. The Animalist disagrees: The development of self-consciousness in a human organism should be understood in terms of the acquisition of a contingent property by an organism that is basically nonpersonal.

Before giving reasons to prefer the Constitution View over Animalism, let me emphasize that the issue here is not over whether or not self-consciousness is a product of natural selection, nor is it over whether or not self-consciousness has some particular kind of neural basis. The issue concerns the *status* of self-consciousness: Does self-consciousness make an ontological difference, or is it just a contingent property of some already existing thing (like an animal)? The Constitution View need not deny that self-consciousness is a property that animals have evolved by natural selection. The Constitutionalist's claim is that when it did evolve by natural selection (if it did), it was sufficiently different from every other property in the natural world that it ushered in a new kind of being.<sup>14</sup> Where an Animalist would say that there is a single animal, unself-conscious at one time and self-conscious at another, the Constitutionalist would say that there is an animal that does not constitute a person at one time and does constitute a person at another. If self-consciousness is a product of natural selection, according to the Constitution View, it still makes an ontological difference. The moral to draw in that case would be that ontology does not recapitulate biology. So to say that self-consciousness is a product of natural selection does not settle the issue between the Animalist and the Constitutionalist.

---

<sup>13</sup> Olson, *The Human Animal*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> The reason that I do not say that self-consciousness ushered in a new kind of animal is that biologists do not take self-consciousness to distinguish species, and I take the identification of new kinds of animals to be within the purview of biology.

## The Constitution View vs. The Animalist View

Regardless of the origin of self-consciousness, or of its physical basis, the question is this: Is self-consciousness just a contingent property of an already existing animal, or does the appearance of self-consciousness mark the coming-to-be of a new kind of entity? Does self-consciousness really make an ontological difference—as the Constitution View holds and the Animalist View denies?

I want to offer considerations in favor of saying that self-consciousness really does make an ontological difference. Then, I shall discuss the methodological principle that underlies my position. Self-consciousness is both unique and significant in a way that I claim is ontological. By saying that self-consciousness is unique, I mean that self-consciousness—one's having an inner life—is not an extension of, addition to, or modification of any other property. A first-person perspective is irreducible to third-person properties.<sup>15</sup> By saying that self-consciousness is ontologically significant, I mean that a world lacking self-conscious beings would be lacking in a kind of reality that our world enjoys. In order to argue for the ontological significance of self-consciousness, I shall consider ways in which self-consciousness makes possible what is distinctive about human persons. Manifold manifestations of self-consciousness attest to its uniqueness and significance:

First, consider natural language and culture. Natural language itself is connected to the first-person perspective in complicated ways. Let me speculate about our evolutionary ancestors: In order for there to be natural language at all, there had to be beings with at least rudimentary first-person perspectives. The first-person way of distinguishing between oneself and everything else is a prerequisite of having a natural language. Then, as natural language developed, the first-person perspectives of its users became more sophisticated. Acquisition of a language enabled its users to entertain increasingly complex thoughts (first-person and otherwise). One lacking self-consciousness could not learn to speak a fully developed natural language—a language that contained such ordinary locutions as 'I believe that I know the answer to number

---

<sup>15</sup> See *Persons and Bodies*, Ch. 3.

four’ or ‘I hope that I will get home safely.’ To be able to entertain the thoughts that these sentences express requires self-consciousness.

Cultural achievements are further consequences of self-consciousness. The ability to wonder what sort of thing we are, to consider our place in the universe—these are specifically first-person abilities that motivate much of science, art and architecture, philosophy and religion.

Second, self-conscious beings are bearers of normativity in ways that nothing else is: Self-consciousness is required for rational and moral agency. A rational agent must be able to evaluate her goals. In order to evaluate her goals, she must be able to ask questions like “Is this a goal that I should really have?” Asking such questions is an exercise in self-consciousness, requiring that one can think of herself as herself, from the first person. A moral agent must be able to appreciate the fact that she (herself) does things and has done things in the past. Such appreciation requires that one have a concept of herself as herself.

Third, in contrast to nonself-conscious beings, we have control over nature, at least in a limited way. We are not only the products of evolution, but also we are the discoverers of evolution and interveners in evolutionary processes, for good or ill. We clone mammals, protect endangered species, devise medical treatments, stop epidemics, produce medications, use birth-control, engage in genetic engineering and so on. Reproduction is the great biological imperative, which we can and do flout. Animals that do not constitute persons can attempt to survive and reproduce, but—being unable to conceive of themselves in the uniquely first-personal way—they cannot try to change their natural behavior.

Fourth, any reflection on one’s life requires self-consciousness. Any thought about one’s desires or other attitudes—“What do I really want?”—requires a first-person perspective. Being anxious about the future, wondering how one is going to die, hoping that one is making the right decision about going into a certain profession, and on and on—are depend directly on self-consciousness. Things that matter deeply to us as individuals—our values, our futures, our ultimate destinies—could matter only to beings

with first-person perspectives. Furthermore, we care in a more intimate way about groups that we are members of (social or biological) than of other groups. (One may care about any country's waging war that does not meet the criteria for a "just war;" but one cares in a quite different (and more wrenching) way about one's own country's waging such a war. One may care about wholesale destruction of the natural environment and the extinction of countless species by any cause whatever; but, again, one cares in a quite different (and more wrenching) way about wholesale destruction of the natural environment by one's own species.)

Fifth, there is a way in which self-consciousness itself brings into existence new reality—the "inner world" that Descartes explored so vividly in the first part of the *Meditations*. Although I do not accept Descartes' reified conception of the realm of his thoughts nor its independence of the "external" world, I do agree that there are facts of the matter—e.g., that Descartes was thinking that he existed—and that the existence of these facts would be logically impossible in the absence of self-conscious beings. Descartes' certainty was that he (himself) existed, not that Descartes existed. His quest in the *Meditations* was ineliminably first-personal. It is not just that Descartes spoke in the first-person for heuristic purposes; rather, *what* he discovered (e.g., that he himself was a thinking thing) was first-personal. The appearance of such first-personal facts implies that self-consciousness has ontological implications, in which case it seems to be more than just another contingent property of animals.

Here, then, are five ways in which self-consciousness makes us the kind of beings that we are: Self-consciousness is required: (i) for natural language and culture, (ii) for normativity in rational and moral arenas, (iii) for control over our destinies as individuals and as a species (and over the destinies of other species), (iv) for understanding of ourselves as individuals and as members of social and biological groups, and (v) for the existence of our "inner lives."

Contrast the difference that self-consciousness makes with the difference that, say, wings on birds make. The appearance of wings makes possible new facts about flying. But there is a big difference between facts about flying and facts about self-

consciousness. Many different species (e.g., of birds and insects) fly, and facts about flying are on a continuum with other kinds of facts—say, about swimming, running, and jumping. The appearance of self-consciousness also makes possible new facts. But the facts that self-consciousness makes possible (e.g., deciding to change one’s life) are not on a continuum with other kinds of facts. Nor do we find self-consciousness among different species. Self-consciousness is novel in a way that wings are not.

Mere consciousness, too—it may be argued—is also novel. I agree, but self-consciousness is novel in a unique way. In the first place, consciousness seems to come in degrees: a housefly may feel pain (else why shouldn’t schoolboys pluck off their wings?), but your beloved dog makes finer discriminations—discriminations that we presume to have a conscious aspect. Consciousness is spread over many different species, and seems to come in different degrees in different species. But only one species supports self-consciousness. In the second place, self-consciousness brings in its wake all the achievements and abilities that I have just enumerated. Consciousness brings in its wake nothing new in terms of achievements and abilities. (If consciousness brought in its wake new achievements and abilities, we could detect which of the lower organisms are conscious by their achievements and abilities.) We do not even know exactly which beings feel pain, say, at all. There is no clear mark of consciousness the way that there is of self-consciousness.

In short, the difference in abilities and achievements between self-conscious and nonself-conscious beings is overwhelming, and overwhelming in a more significant way than any other single difference that we know of. The abilities of self-conscious, brooding and introspective beings—from Augustine in the *Confessions* to analysts in psychoanalysis to former U.S. Presidents’ writing their memoirs—are of a different order from those of tool-using, mate-seeking, dominance-establishing nonhuman primates—even though our use of tools, seeking of mates and establishing dominance have their origins in our nonhuman ancestors. With respect to *the range of what we can do* (from planning our futures to wondering how we got ourselves into such a mess, and with respect to *the moral significance of what we can do* (from assessing our goals to confessing our sins), self-conscious beings are obviously unique.

The uniqueness of self-consciousness, together with the kind of significance that it has, counts in favor of taking self-consciousness to have ontological significance: Self-consciousness makes us the kind of beings that we are.

I have been arguing for the ontological significance of self-consciousness. But it is equally important for my view that we are wholly constituted by animals and so have biological natures. The animals that constitute us are part of the seamless animal kingdom which sees no discontinuity between human animals and other higher primates. Darwinism offers a great unifying thesis that “there is one grand pattern of similarity linking all life.”<sup>16</sup> Human and nonhuman organisms both find their place in this one grand pattern.

Considered in terms of genetic or morphological properties or of biological functioning, there is no gap or discontinuity between chimpanzees and human animals. In fact, human animals are biologically more closely related to certain species of chimpanzees than the chimpanzees are related to gorillas and orangutans.<sup>17</sup> So, *biologically considered*, there’s no significant difference between us and higher nonhuman animals. But *all things considered*, there is a huge discontinuity between us and nonhuman animals. And this discontinuity arises from the fact that we, and no other part of the animal kingdom, are self-conscious. (If I thought that chimpanzees or computers really did have first-person perspectives, I would put them in the same category that we are in—namely, persons.)

These two considerations—the uniqueness of self-consciousness and the seamlessness of the animal kingdom—may now be seen as two data:

- (A) Self-consciousness is unique in the universe—in that self-consciousness (one’s having an inner life) is not an extension of, addition to, or modification of some other property. Self-consciousness is an extremely

---

<sup>16</sup> Niles Eldredge, *The Triumph of Evolution* (New York: W.H. Freeman, 2000): 31.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995): 336. Dennett is discussing Jared Diamond’s *The Third Chimpanzee*.



significant feature of human persons. As self-conscious beings, human persons have vastly different abilities from nonself-conscious beings.

(B) The animal kingdom is a seamless whole, revealing no important biological (morphological, genetic, etc.) discontinuities between human and nonhuman animals. Human persons are, in some sense, animals—biological beings.

I believe that these two data can be much more naturally accommodated by the Constitution View than by the Animalist View. According to the Animalist View, the sense in which human persons are animals is identity; human animals (= human persons) are just another primate species—along with chimpanzees, orangutans, monkeys and gorillas. The fact that human persons alone have inner lives (and all the abilities discussed) is not a particularly important fact about persons. Animalists have nothing to say about what distinguishes us from nonhuman primates. From an Animalist perspective, self-consciousness is just a contingent property of organisms that are fundamentally nonpersonal. The significance of self-consciousness is rendered invisible by Animalists. So, I do not think that Animalists do justice to datum A.

On the other hand, the Constitution View explains both these data: The Constitution View explains datum A—that we are self-conscious beings in a world apparently lacking self-consciousness elsewhere. It explains this datum by taking self-consciousness to be what makes us ontologically distinct. The property of having an inner life—not just the property of sentience—is so extraordinary, so utterly unlike any other property in the world, that beings with this property are a different kind of thing from beings without it. Only self-conscious beings can dread old age or discover evolution or intervene in its otherwise blind operations. Since first-person perspectives are essential to us, it is no mystery that we human persons are self-conscious.

The Constitution View also explains datum B—that we are biological beings in an animal kingdom that is seamless—by holding that we are constituted by human animals that are on a continuum with nonhuman animals and then explaining what constitution is. The continuity of the animal kingdom is undisturbed. Well, almost: human animals that

constitute persons do differ from other animals, but not in any essential way. Person-constituting human animals have first-person-perspective properties that non-person-constituting human animals lack; but the animals that have these properties only have them derivatively—wholly in virtue of their constitution relations. To put it more precisely, human animals have first-person-perspective properties wholly in virtue of constituting persons that have first-person-perspective properties independently of their constitution-relations. So, the Constitution View honors the continuity of the biological world and construes us as being part of that world in virtue of being constituted by human animals. Unsurprisingly, I conclude that the Constitution View gives a better account of human persons than does the Animalist View.

To sum up: Animalism cannot do justice to datum A. The Constitution View can do justice to both datum A and datum B. It can agree with Animalism that considered biologically, human animals are just another primate species—not very special from a biological point of view. So, there is no difference between the Constitution View and Animalism with respect to datum B. However, the Constitution View is far superior to Animalism with respect to datum A. Whereas the Animalist simply denies the relevance of self-consciousness (or of any psychological properties) to our being the kind of entities that we are, the Constitution View brings forward the ways in which self-consciousness is significant that we have discussed. According to the Constitution View, self-consciousness is sufficiently different from everything else known to us in the natural world that it is reasonable to say that the difference that self-consciousness makes is an ontological difference. This conclusion is more than adequate to explain datum A.

The issue between the Constitution View and Animalism is this: What kind of beings are we most fundamentally? The Animalist says that we are most fundamentally biological beings, and has nothing to say about our mental and moral properties. The Constitutionalist says that we are fundamentally moral beings, and still can explain our biological properties. To hold with the Animalist that human persons are essentially animals, and not essentially self-conscious, is to make properties like *wondering how one should live* irrelevant to what we most fundamentally are, and properties like *having digestion* central to what we most fundamentally are. I think that what we most fundamentally

are is a matter of what is distinctive about us and not what we share with nonhuman animals.

### Methodological Morals

This discussion raises some important methodological issues, two of which I want to discuss briefly. First, my position implies that ontology need not track biology. Second, my position implies that the fundamental nature of something may be determined by what it can do rather than by what it is made of.

With respect to the first issue—that ontology need not track biology—my position is to take biologists as authoritative over the animal kingdom and agree that the animal kingdom is a seamless whole that includes human animals; there are no significant biological differences between human and higher nonhuman animals. But from the fact that there are no significant *biological* differences between human and higher nonhuman animals, it does not follow that there are no significant differences, *all things considered*, between us and all members—human and nonhuman—of the biological kingdom. This is so, because we are constituted by animals without being identical to the animals that constitute us. For example, the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker writes, “A Darwinian would say that ultimately organisms have only two [goals]: to survive and to reproduce.”<sup>18</sup> But he also points out that he himself is “voluntarily childless,” and comments, “I am happy to be that way, and if my genes don’t like it, they can go jump in the lake.”<sup>19</sup> These remarks indicate that Pinker has a first-person notion of himself as something more than his animal nature as revealed by Darwinians. The Constitution View leaves it open to say that although biology fully reveals our animal nature, our animal nature does not exhaust our complete nature all things considered.

Thus, we have a distinction between ourselves regarded from a biological point of view, and ourselves regarded from an all-things-considered point of view. We know more about ourselves all-things-considered than biology can tell us. For example, the quotidian considerations that I mustered to show the uniqueness and importance of self-

---

<sup>18</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977): 541.

<sup>19</sup> *How the Mind Works*, 52.

consciousness are not learned from biology: that we are rational and moral agents; that we care about certain things such as our own futures; that we have manifold cultural achievements; that we can interfere with the blind workings of evolution; that we enjoy inner lives. These are everyday truths that are constantly being confirmed by anyone who cares to look, without need of any theory. These truths are as firmly established as any in biology. So, they are available for our philosophical reflection—understood, as Wilfrid Sellars put it, as “how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest sense of the term.”<sup>20</sup> With this synthetic ideal, it is clear that we cannot just read ontology off any of the sciences. Everything we know—whether from science or everyday life—should go into determining the joints at which we are pleased to think that nature is carved.

This kind of methodological consideration underlies my holding that there is an ontological division that is not mirrored by a biological division. As Stephen Pinker and others point out, small biological differences can have big effects.<sup>21</sup> I agree. Small biological differences can even have ontological consequences. Biologically similar beings may be ontologically different. Indeed, that is my view.

Now turn to the second methodological issue: My position is that what something most fundamentally is—its nature—is more nearly determined by what it can do than by what it is made of. This is obvious in the case of artifacts: What makes something a clock has to do with its telling time, no matter what it is made of and no matter how its parts are arranged. Similarly, according to the Constitution View, what makes something a person has to do with its being self-conscious and its ensuing abilities, no matter what it is made of.<sup>22</sup> Self-consciousness make an ontological difference because what self-conscious beings can do is vastly different from what nonself-conscious beings can do. We persons are ourselves originators of many new kinds of reality—from cathedrals to catheters, from bullets to bell-bottoms, from cell-phones to supercomputers. One reason

---

<sup>20</sup> “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963): 1-40. (Quote, p. 1)

<sup>21</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, 40-1.

<sup>22</sup> I reject Humean metaphysics, according to which the identity of a thing is determined entirely by its ‘categorical’ properties that are independent of what the thing can do, and according to which what a thing can do is determined by contingent laws of nature.

for this for this methodological stance is that it allows that the nature of something is tied to what is significant about the thing. What is significant about us—as even some Animalists agree<sup>23</sup>—are our characters, memories, mental lives and not the respiration, circulation and metabolism that we share with nonhuman animals. To understand our nature is to understand what is significant and distinctive about us, and what is significant and distinctive about us is clearly our self-consciousness.

### Conclusion

So, according to the Constitution View that I endorse, the difference that self-consciousness makes is an ontological difference. The Constitution View offers a way to set a traditional preoccupation of the great philosophers in the context of the “neo-Darwinian synthesis” in biology.<sup>24</sup> The traditional preoccupation concerns our inwardness—our abilities not just to think, but to think about our thoughts; to see ourselves and each other as subjects; to have rich inner lives. The modern synthesis in biology has made it clear that we are biological beings, continuous with the rest of the animal kingdom. The Constitution View of human persons shows how we are part of the world of organisms even as it recognizes our uniqueness.<sup>25</sup> What sets us apart ontologically is our self-consciousness.

University of Massachusetts at Amherst  
November 9, 2002

---

<sup>23</sup> A prominent Animalist, Eric T. Olson, insists that a mental life is irrelevant to what we most fundamentally are. Supposing that there could be a transfer of your cerebral cortex into another body, while your cerebrumless body still carries out biological functions like respiration, circulation, etc., Olson argues that the cerebrumless body is actually you and that the person with your memories, character, and mental life is actually not you. Nevertheless, he says that it is rational for you to care selfishly about the person who has your cerebrum (who is not actually you), rather than the cerebrumless body (who actually is you.) See *The Human Animal: Personal Identity Without Psychology* (New York: Oxford, 1997): 52.

<sup>24</sup> Variations on this term are widely used. For example, see Ernst Mayr, *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology: Observations of an Evolutionist* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988); Philip Kitcher, *Abusing Science: The Case Against Creationism* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1982); Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> For further arguments in the same vein as this article, see my “The Ontological Status of Persons,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002): 370-388. Some of the sentences in the paragraph to which this note is appended came from that article.