

HOMO PSYCHOLOGICUS

Introduction to “Consciousness Regained”, Oxford University Press, 1983

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Within little more than a week of the Creation, Eve had been beguiled by a subtle serpent, she had tempted Adam, and God Himself had been caught telling lies. 'But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,' God had said, 'thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.' But the serpent had told the woman, 'Ye shall not surely die.' And Eve had eaten the apple — and she had not died, nor had Adam. Men, women and Gods too, it seems, were deceivers ever.

The descent of man and his companions, having started with the Fall, evidently gathered pace with each new generation. The first books of the Bible are a chronicle of deceit, treachery, selfishness — of the cunning exploitation of one person by another. 'Subtlety', the characteristic of the serpent, finds its fullest expression in the work of human beings. Jacob, the smooth man, succeeds in passing himself off as his hairy brother Esau: 'Thy brother', says Isaac, 'came with subtlety and hath taken away thy blessing'. Jonadab tells Amnon, the son of David, how to seduce his sister by feigning sickness and then forcing her to bed when she comes to minister to him: 'Jonadab', we are told, 'was a very subtle man.' Solomon warns the youth of his country to beware of loose women, who despite their good looks are 'subtle of heart'.

The Bible may not be a reliable guide to human evolution. But its authors diagnosed one of the fundamental traits which distinguish Man in nature. Human beings are born psychologists. Subtle of heart and of head, they are uniquely skillful in their ability to handle one another. They know better than any other animal how to anticipate — and work upon — the behaviour of fellow members of their species.

But although, in reality as much as in fable, people will use this skill to promote their own interests over those of others, man's subtlety is not inherently a hostile trait. Those who have the psychological skill to be subtly exploitative have the skill to be subtly loving, subtly charitable and subtly altruistic too. And if, in the course of evolution, it has sometimes been to people's advantage to get the better of their fellow human beings, it has equally been to

their advantage to get along with them: people have required their art as psychologists in order to humour, to reassure and to succour their allies, quite as often as they have required it to outwit their rivals.

It was, as I argue in succeeding chapters, the circumstances of primitive man's *social* life — his membership of a complexly interacting human community, his need to do well for himself while at the same time sustaining others — which did more than anything to make man, as a species, the subtle and insightful creature we know today. For, with the continual pressure towards greater mutual understanding, natural selection favoured two parallel developments in the evolution of the human mind.

'Social intelligence' required, for a start, the development of certain abstract intellectual skills. If men were to negotiate the maze of social interaction it was essential that they should become capable of a special sort of forward planning. They had to become *calculating* beings, capable of looking ahead to yet unrealised possibilities, of plotting, counter-plotting and pitting their wits against group companions no less subtle than themselves. Never before, in their dealings with the non-social world, the world of sticks and stones, not even in their dealings with the world of living predators and prey, had human beings needed the powers of abstract reasoning which they now needed in their dealings with each other. But now their very survival within the social group depended on it. And it asked, I believe, for a level of intelligence unmatched in any other sphere of living. *Homo*, once he threw in his lot with society, had given himself no choice but to become *Homo habilis*, next *Homo sapiens*. Man the clever, man the wise.

But cleverness alone was not enough. Before human beings could even begin to calculate where their own and others' behaviour would take them, it was essential that they should acquire a much deeper understanding of the character of the strange creature who stood at the centre of their calculations — Man himself. They had to have a way of finding out what men as such are like, how they react, what makes them tick. They had to become sensitive to other people's moods and passions, appreciative of their waywardness or stubbornness, capable of reading the signs in their faces and equally the lack of signs, capable of guessing what each person's past experience holds hidden in the present for the future. They had above all to make sense of the enigma of the ghost in the machine. In short they had to become 'natural psychologists'. Clever man had to become *Homo psychologicus*.

The emergence of man to the full status of natural psychologist has come about as a result of both biological and cultural evolution. It has required fundamental changes to the human brain, and later, as I discuss in chapters 6—8, the creation of special institutions within human culture. It has taken a long time. But it has won for the human species a remarkable — and puzzling - prize. Puzzling, because the ability to do psychology, however much it may nowadays be an ability possessed by every ordinary man and woman, is by no means an ordinary ability.

Let no one pretend that natural psychology — or psychology under any other title — is anything but an extraordinarily difficult thing to do. Philosophers and scientists who, with all the paraphernalia of theory and experimental method at their disposal, have been trying for a century or more to develop their own science of human behaviour, have found the task a daunting and a humbling one. Indeed academic psychology, as studied in the universities, has proved to be the most intractable branch of all the sciences. Psychology, both in theory and in practice, is much more difficult than physics.

I have at hand a textbook of Physical Mechanics. 'Consider', it says, 'the case of a system of bodies, attracting or repelling each other or acting on one another by contact or through connections ...'.¹ It is of course just such considerations which must have been exercising the minds of every ordinary man and woman for several million years. Yet for the student of physics the 'bodies' in question are lifeless lumps of matter, attracted by the force of gravity, acting on one another by friction, connected by rods or strings; while for ordinary people they are the bodies of other human beings, attracted by sentiment, interacting through speech and gesture, connected by bonds of blood or friendship . . . and these, by the standards of physics, must be counted amongst the most lawless and unprincipled bodies in the universe.

There are not, and never will be, Newtonian principles of human behaviour. Those academic psychologists who have tried to emulate the method and theory of classical physics — who have tried like Clark Hull in the 1930s to write a latter-day *Principia* — have proved what any layman might have told them at the start: the mountain of human complexity cannot be turned into a molehill of scientific laws.

How is it, then, that human beings have acquired a *natural* ability to do psychology? How can the blind forces of evolution have succeeded, where objective scholarship has failed?

To answer a riddle with a paradox: blindness to theoretical objections may have provided

the best chance of practical success. From the beginning, the task for the natural psychologist was no more and no less than this: that he should come up with a system for interpreting and predicting human behaviour which gave the right answers, for whatever reasons. Ignorant of the method and manners of the scientist, unaware of the warnings of any philosophical Cassandra, he had no choice but to adopt a policy of shameless pragmatism. If the job was worth doing, it was no doubt worth doing well. But given that it was the ends which mattered, not the means, he was never under any constraint to make his system of psychology theoretically respectable. If the job could not be done straightforwardly, it was worth doing deviously. And so, along the line, human beings were at liberty to adopt any style, any trick of reasoning which brought them nearer to their goal. If it sometimes meant their trafficking with techniques and ideas which flew in the face of what we now call objective scientific logic, so be it. What was wanted was a plain man's guide.

Not that the plain man's guide, as it emerged, was all that plain. Indeed the formula for understanding human behaviour which has come to lie at the heart of natural psychology is arguably as fancy as it is philosophically impertinent. My thesis — I shall call it such for the time being — is that Nature's solution to the problem of doing psychology has been to give to every member of the human species both the power and inclination *to use a privileged picture of his own self as a model for what it is like to be another person*.

In short, what the natural psychologist is empowered to do is to enter by the light of his subjective experience into other people's minds. And in doing so he trusts to a principle which was stated with characteristic bluntness by Thomas Hobbes:

[Given] the similitude of the thoughts and passions of one man, to the thoughts and passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself, and considereth what he doth, when he does *think, opine, reason, hope, fear &c.* and upon what grounds; he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon the like occasions.¹

I shall come, in Chapter 6, to evidence that this is in fact what human beings unhesitatingly do, and that it works. Even allowing that there can never truly be a perfect match between one man and another — allowing that each individual has, as George Eliot commented in *Middlemarch*, 'an equivalent centre of self, whence the light and shadows must always fall with a certain difference' — none the less Hobbes's principle serves the psychologist better than any other principle known either to common sense or to science.

But first we should consider just what this way of doing psychology involves. On the face of it, the idea of using oneself as a model for others may perhaps seem nothing special. Any student of human behaviour has to start somewhere. Given that the natural psychologist is fortunate enough to be in his own right one of the very creatures whose behaviour he wants to understand, what could be more reasonable than that he should start by making observations on himself? His own body, besides being the human body with which of necessity he spends the greatest time, is a body with which he has a uniquely intimate relationship: he can observe it in secret and in the open, in sickness and in health, in the company of friends, enemies, parents, children, lovers . . . Scarcely surprising therefore that he should begin his analysis of other people by drawing on self-observation for most of his evidence about how a typical human being behaves. Even physicists have been known to refer to the evidence of their own bodies: it may not have been his own body which Galileo dropped from the Leaning Tower of Pisa, but it was his own body which Archimedes used to displace the water in the bath.

If that was all there was to it — if self-observation meant simply observation in the usual sense of 'observation', namely looking at a body from outside — natural psychology would indeed be nothing special. But to the natural psychologist, self-observation means not merely observing from outside but observing from within, not merely looking *at* one's own behaviour but looking *in* on it — in on the 'thoughts and passions' which accompany it. And the capacity for that kind of inner observation — the capacity to look into oneself and consider what one doth when one does think, hope, fear &c. — is something of an altogether different order. It represents, I believe, the most peculiar and sophisticated development in the evolution of the human mind.

To give it a name, it is the capacity for 'reflexive consciousness': consciousness of consciousness. As a biological capacity, I believe that it has evolved expressly to meet the exceptional needs of man as a psychologist; and I suspect it has no parallel in lower animals. Though it might be argued (I suggest as much myself in Chapter 3) that there are certain other highly social mammals — wolves, dolphins, maybe the anthropoid apes — whose way of life is sufficiently complex for them too to have developed some psychological skills, I know of no reason to suppose that these or any other species have in fact travelled the same road as human beings.

When the natural psychologist looks into himself, what does he find there? A 'beetle' in a box, was Ludwig Wittgenstein's reply: a beetle which only the subject himself can look at, which

he can never compare with anyone else's beetle, and which — since it defies public definition — there is not much point in trying to discuss out loud. 'One can "divide through" by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.' Of this thing in the box, then, of inner experience in general, perhaps I ought to say no more . . .

But the fact is that, whatever may be the logical problems of describing inner experience, human beings everywhere openly attempt it. There is, so far as I know, no language in the world which does not have what is deemed to be an appropriate vocabulary for talking about the objects of reflexive consciousness, and there are no people in the world who do not quickly learn to make free use of this vocabulary. Indeed, far from being something which baffles human understanding, the open discussion of one's inner experience is literally child's play to a human being, something which children begin to learn before they are more than two or three years old.⁴ And the fact that this common-sense vocabulary is acquired so easily suggests that this form of description is natural to human beings precisely because it maps directly on to an inner reality which each individual, of himself, innately knows. It is not necessarily the case, as Wittgenstein would have it, that all languages are 'games' for which the rules must be publicly agreed (with the corollary that where there can be no public verification there can be no language and no sense): the rules of the game may, as in this case, be written on the lid of each man's box.

It is true of course that different individuals will find different ways of expressing what their experience is like, and that some are more articulate than others. It is also true that some people may hold an unusual view of where, in relation to their bodies, the experience is located: the Dinka, an African tribe living in the southern Sudan, are said to regard some attributes of the 'inner self as fields of consciousness outside their bodies.' None the less, when allowance is made for certain eccentricities, there is a remarkable convergence in the accounts which people of all races and all cultures give of what reflexive consciousness reveals to them. The gist of it — and I am attempting here to summarise, not to caricature — is this:

'In association with my body there exists a spirit, conscious of its own existence and its continuity in time. This is the spirit (mind, soul . . .) which I call "I". Among the chief attributes which "I" possess are these: I can act, I can perceive, and I can feel.

'Thus it is "I" who, by the exertion of my will, bring about almost all my significant bodily actions: I will my arm to rise — it rises; I will my lips to speak — they speak ... It is "I" who,

by means of my external senses, perceive the outside world: I see sights, hear sounds, smell smells — and so build up a picture of what is happening around me . . . And it is "I" who, within the boundaries of myself, feel states of emotion, sensations, moods and passions: I who am in pain, I who am scared, I who am consumed by jealousy . . .

'But over all this, "I" as a spirit have wants and aspirations. And those things I want or aspire to are largely dictated by my present or anticipated emotions, sensations, moods and passions. When I am in pain I want to ease it, when I am scared I want to find security, when I am jealous I want to take revenge . . .

'Functioning as "I" do as a unitary being, I work like this: by planning my actions in relation to what my perceptions tell me about their probable effects, I try to satisfy whatever wants or aspirations my states of feeling have aroused.'

Now all this is very odd. Indeed if this kind of story about one's inner self were not already so familiar to us — if it were not already in our bones — it might well seem no more than an elaborate fantasy. The idea of a conscious spirit which wills, feels, wants etc. is seemingly the stuff of myth and metaphysics, not of science. Such notions have no place in Newton's, or any other materialist's, picture of the universe, and their objective status is to say the least uncertain. No wonder, perhaps, that there have been academic scientists and philosophers ready to declare that we should not be taken in: that the whole story is meaningless, that consciousness has no biological function and is merely an epiphenomenon, the irrelevant 'noise of the machine'. No wonder that there have been other scholars, led by the self-styled behaviourists, who have taken an even dimmer view, stoutly maintaining not only that the story is a fantasy, but that since it is essentially irrational, illogical, unverifiable, unfalsifiable and metaphysical, it must also be dangerously misleading.

Yet whatever else it is, common sense and common observation tell us that the story cannot in practice be misleading. If it were, if it led too often to false conclusions about the way that human beings behave, the story-tellers would surely have received their quietus at the hands of natural selection long ago. And yet today, wherever we look, we find members of the human species making free use of this story for the interpretation of behaviour. The proof of the apple has been in the eating: it has been eaten countless times in the course of human evolution, and men as psychologists have evidently thrived. It is no good the behaviourists' saying it can't be done. Wittgenstein was an aeronautical engineer before he turned philosopher, no doubt a clever one. But even he would surely have been laughed to

scorn if, after examining a bird's wing, he had emerged from his study to announce that he had proved from first principles that it is logically impossible for birds to fly.

'The truth', Robert Pirsig wrote, 'comes knocking on the door and you say "Go away, I'm looking for the truth", and so it goes away.'" We should, I think, open the door to a straightforward explanation of why the story of the inner self evidently works so well. It is that, in the course of human evolution, natural selection has ensured that the description which reflexive consciousness gives of inner experience is anything but a meaningless fantasy. On the contrary, this story — including all the stuff about an T which wills and wants and feels — is in its own terms a *valid* description of the mechanism which is causally responsible for human behaviour, namely the human brain. And I mean valid in the dictionary sense of 'fulfilling all the necessary conditions' for what a description of the human brain ought to be like, if such a description is to be used by human beings to understand the human behaviour which is produced by human brains.

This suggestion, admittedly, may seem a little puzzling. Quite apart from the oddity of suggesting that it is the *brain* which ordinary people are describing, when most people have never so much as seen a brain (and many of them do not even know they have one), there is a more obvious reason to be sceptical. For it may be thought that, *as* a description of a brain, the story of the T simply does not ring true. Students of physiology have been studying brains for several hundred years, and the description they give is a quite different one. Brains, they tell us, are made of nerve-cells, chemicals and electricity. When a surgeon opens the head of a human being he does not find a soul.

No, he does not. Neither does a tourist who visits Oxford find the University. Nor did Pontius Pilate, when he cross-examined Jesus, find the Son of God. There are, as we shall see, different ways of describing the same thing, all of which may be valid in their way. To Pilate's famous question 'What is truth?', the answer must be 'It depends on who you are, and what you are trying to do.'

Suppose, for the sake of illustration, that we were to seek a valid description of that remarkable organ which constitutes the metaphorical nerve-centre of British politics, the House of Commons. Imagine two observers, with rather different interests, present on the same occasion in the Press Gallery: one is a maker of documentary films, a foreigner who knows nothing of the habits of the British legislature and is anxious to write down exactly what goes on; the other is the parliamentary correspondent of *The Times*.

The film-maker's description might read like this:

Between 16.00 and 18.00 hours on Friday afternoon, men and women on each side of the chamber shouted at each other, threw bits of paper, clapped their hands, stamped their feet, and talked about cod; then, at a signal from an old fellow in a curly wig, everyone got to their feet, and those who had previously been sitting on the right side of the chamber all made their way out through a door marked AYES, while those who had previously been sitting on the left side all made their way out through a door marked NOES.

The parliamentary correspondent's description like this:

Following Prime Minister's Question Time, there ensued a lively debate on the White-Fish Fisheries Bill; the Speaker called for a vote, whereupon the House divided, and, under the influence of a three-line whip, the motion to give the Bill a second reading was carried for the Government.

Two very different descriptions of the same events, both of them accurate, both arguably valid; and yet with no obvious resemblance one to the other. Without doubt the film-maker's description would help him to reconstruct, if he later wanted to, a picture of what actually happened in the chamber of the House of Commons on that momentous afternoon. But it is surely the newspaper correspondent's description which would be more helpful to a parliamentary historian.

And yet the latter description, if it were to fall on unsympathetic ears, might well be dismissed as nonsensical guff. For it is a story which, on the face of it, is quite as illogical, ungrammatical and bordering on the metaphysical as anything the natural psychologist has to offer. Who ever heard of a 'house dividing', or of a 'motion being carried'? What is this thing, the 'Government'? Is it a thing at all? And yet . . . the correspondent's description does make the greater contribution to parliamentary history.

Let us return to the brain. The point of my example is not that brain physiologists bear any close resemblance to makers of documentary films (though a reader of, say, the *Journal of Neurophysiology* might sometimes innocently think it). There are, I am well aware, a good many physiologists who, for all their talk about chemicals and nerve-cells, do have a genuine interest in higher 'mental' processes — in the global achievements as well as the particular antics of the nerve-cells they describe. But my point is that just because the brain *can* be described in physiological terms, it does not mean it *ought* to be. Indeed the physiologist's

description, so far from being the only valid description of the brain, is necessarily one among many alternative descriptions which may be more or less suited to a particular observer. It depends, as I said, on who the observer is and what he is trying to do. And if he is an ordinary human being, trying to understand behaviour, then the physiologist's description is likely to be almost worthless to him. Not even the specialist has yet been — and I doubt that he ever will be — able to make other than trivial predictions about human behaviour by direct reference to the fact that such behaviour is (as it is) ultimately controlled by nerve-cells, chemicals and electricity.

What the ordinary person needs in performing the workaday task of the natural psychologist is a description of the brain which, like that of the parliamentary correspondent, has been precisely crafted for the job in hand: and that means a description which is both relevant and accessible. Relevant to answering the questions which human beings daily ask about the inner causes of behaviour, and accessible to their wide but not unbounded powers of reasoning and imagination.

It is, I suggest, just such a description which reflexive consciousness provides. When the natural psychologist looks into himself and observes what he doth when he does think, hope, fear &c, he is enabled to read off (as it were from the columns of *The Times*) a relevant and accessible commentary on the parliamentary proceedings of his own brain: a commentary which is certainly highly selective, condensed, partial and presumptuous, but which none the less tells him most of what he needs to know, in a form which he is predisposed to understand.