Human nature(s), irrationality and 'common good'

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God, it would be good to be a fake somebody rather than a real nobody.
Mike Tyson. 'New York Times' 21 May 2002.

Your theory is crazy but it is not crazy enough to be true.
Neils Bohr, Nobel Laureate in Physics, quoted in Edelman (2006 p 53)

I can calculate the motion of heavenly bodies but not the madness of people.
Isaac Newton quoted in Marcus (2008 p 144)

Introduction

In this paper I explore three very commonly used terms, each of which has a long history and each of which, I shall propose, hides more than it reveals. I shall deconstruct the key terms in the title of this paper.

Along with numerous other frequently used 'significant' terms they are often used loosely and lazily. They only *seem* to solve problems. Our language is often assumed to solve problems, but if language is 'the answer' then what was 'the question' ? One reply is: 'We need language to try to answer the question of meaning'. I shall argue that language cannot provide us with secure and certain meanings. Words are slippery.

I shall also argue that when these three terms are carefully analysed they actually raise problems rather than solve them. I shall present arguments which may seem counter-intuitive. They may even seem strange. But then I have a view that language itself is indeed both familiar and strange. Language is anything but what it seems to be. In this I have been very influenced by Wittgenstein's notion of 'language games' and 'forms of life'. (For a discussion see McGinn 1997). I have also been influenced by Lyotard's warning to: *'adopt an attitude of incredulity towards meta-narratives'.* (Lyotard 1984 p xxiv).

Meta-narratives are those culturally constructed overarching world views which deeply influence how we make sense of the world, ourselves and our relationships. It could even be said that meta-narratives create our world views. We create our individual narratives within these culturally constructed meta-narratives. Meta-narratives are the major sources

of our meanings. We live and move and have our being within meta-narratives. They frame our sense of being. They structure our sense of personal identity. Typical examples would be: religions, political ideologies, notions of democracy and freedom, the idea of the autonomous individual. The relatively recent advent of 'human rights' could also be seen as the emergence of a contemporary meta-narrative. (See www.equalrightstrust.org for latest impressive attempt launched 21 October 2008).

I take from Lyotard's warning the wisdom of doubting that our meta-narratives are 'True'. They are ways of thinking about that which cannot be known. They are systems of beliefs and values which we should adopt critically not dogmatically. They are our necessary attempts to make the ineffable effable.

The initial impetus for this paper arose from a recent involvement in a fascinating and confusing discussion about 'virtual' Second Life on the internet. SL is a virtual world with its own economy, relationships and cultures. On SL 'real' people can construct whatever 'virtual' versions of themselves they choose. The SL is the avatar which perhaps in old speak is an *alter ego*. The discussion was very stimulating and raised issues which I had not thought about previously in these internet/virtual terms. It also made me reflect on some of the thinking which I have previously done on beliefs relating to 'self' and 'identity'. *

This recent discussion reinforced for me that I seem to operate on various sorts of assumptions and puzzlements in relation to myself and other people which I have listed below (p 22 ff). Reflecting on the Second Life discussion – which included references to 'the common good', the notion of 'rational' and to the nature of 'identity' – also led me to revisit my thinking on the recent UK parliamentary stem cell research debate including issues around pre-implantation genetic diagnosis which creates options for putative parents to choose an embryo which is free from known disabling genetic disorders. It is perhaps even more significant that embedded in these complex issues is the much more complicated idea of 'human nature'. Indeed, it was differing beliefs about 'human nature' which resulted in irreconcilable positions in votes on aspects of the Bill before UK Parliament.

This paper is my attempt to explicate, if not exactly clarify, my confusions and my general position. It's a short paper on huge topics.

But just before I state and explore my three main propositions it is important to say some things about language and some of the problematic ways in which we use it. Language is at the same time a common attribute of the species *homo sapiens* in all cultures and also one of the most difficult of our behaviours to understand. Another is consciousness.

One of the many problems which we have with our language in its four different forms –

* See my paper on: 'Beliefs and Identity' www.bowlandpress.com click on *Seminar papers*. Also available on the British Humanist Association website as: 'Beliefs and Identity'.

spoken, signed, written and thought – is that constant and often uncritical usage leads us to assume that the world 'is' as our language states it to be. That is, we seem to assume that our historically grounded and culturally constructed language and the world it labels are 'givens' and that all we need is to make language coherent with the world and that, in so far as we make it coherent, it corresponds to the world because it represents the world. Unfortunately this assumption is profoundly misleading. As Rorty (1989 p 6) observes: *The world does not speak. Only we do.* Hence our meanings are our myths and vice versa. Our myths are never 'True' because the language of our myths is always limited in its proximity to reality. Plato, in his metaphysical version of 'Ideal Forms', grappled with this problem and set major aspects of the agenda for subsequent Western philosophy. Human existence is a struggle to achieve Ideal Forms.

Van Fraassen's (2008) book deals specifically with issues and problems of representation in the sciences but some of his fascinating analysis is equally applicable to the use of language as our symbolic way of representing various realities within our linguistic culture. His view is that even scientific symbols can never totally correspond to those aspects of reality which they attempt to represent.

I suggest, therefore, that we do not fully understand the complex confusion which is 'words' and 'language' and their uncertain and necessarily symbolic and problematic relationships with what we perceive as reality. Sorting out grammar and syntax are the least of our problems compared to the difficulties created by the semantics of language and their puzzling representational relationships to the multiple experienced realities which we eagerly seek to understand. These multiple realities, within which and out of which we necessarily seek to create meanings, include: the nature of the world, our relationships, politics, religions, cultural differences, notions of identity, structure and functions of the brain, desire, purpose and motivation and so on. Indeed it is the *semantic puzzle* which is the most fundamental problem of our existence: What does our language *mean* ? What do *semantics mean* ? What does *our existence* mean ? Is there an accessible and valid source of any meaning which is external to *our own invented meanings ?* Are we *necessarily* responsible for our own meanings ? When people say in a derogatory fashion: 'It's just semantics' they completely miss the point and the problem which is the problematic unavoidability of all semantics.

Eagleton's (2007) book certainly misses neither the point nor the problem of semantics.

Perhaps this is what Wittgenstein had in mind when he observed in 'The Tractatus' that 'We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, then the problems of life have still not been touched on at all. Of course there is then no question left, and just this is the answer. The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem'. . . Once we have recognized that it is beyond all such questions, we understand that this *is our answer.* (Eagleton 2007 p 162 and 163).

Another way of putting this is to say that even if it were the case that the sciences managed to develop understandings and symbols which corresponded directly to the reality to which they referred we would still be confronted with the problem of meaning.

Even totally accurate descriptions of reality (e.g. a Theory of Everything) would still leave us with *existential* problems relating to the meaning of our existence. We would still be confronted with complex ethical issues, political issues, personal issues and so on. Existentially we would not have solved our predicament. I consider that the inevitable *existential* failure of scientific questions and answers is also the case with questions and problems around the *semantics* of language. There is no solution to the human condition.

I therefore suggest that any assumption that language 'corresponds' precisely to the world and gives 'the answer' to the world is seriously misleading – not least in relation to a confident or certain source of meaning. Neither the sciences nor language itself provide us with secure meanings – but scientific outcomes can exert profound effects on our sense of meaning. Evolution, genetics and quantum mechanics for example. It seems evident to me that the sciences, with their various and changing methodologies, seek to establish increasing, functional but elusive correspondence between theories (symbols) and reality. They are useful – and our most important way of interrogating and representing reality - but they are not *semantically* or *existentially* decisive. Fundamental sciences, especially physics, do not result in certainties and therefore do not – cannot - provide certain meanings.

These fundamental sciences presumably apply to all that exists subsequent to the Big Bang – including ourselves. The CERN experiment, started on 10 September 2008, is designed to investigate fundamental reality by exploring sub-atomic particles. We ourselves are inevitably the result of the Big Bang and are therefore inherently unstable. (See Rosenblum and Kuttner 2007 on the uncertainties of quantum mechanics). Smolin's (2007) reference to quantum mechanics adds to the complexities and basic uncertainties of fundamental science: *Quantum mechanics has to be expanded, to allow for many different descriptions, depending on who the observer is.* (p 8). Certainty there is not. There is no universal, singular solution to the problem of meaning. There are multiple perspectives which cannot be resolved into a single perspective which unifies both reality and meaning.

Nor does the idea of various divine revelations impress me as valid sources of certain or valid meaning, particularly given the diverse, changing, ancient, pre-modern and conflicting 'revelations' which are adopted by various believers. Revelations usually seem to reflect the needs of powerful groups to maintain their particular meta-narratives and narratives of meaning, to perpetuate dominance and their denigration of other believers' beliefs. Typically these dominant religious narratives are heterosexual, patriarchal and ancient. They seem to have a confidence and authority based on mere assertion, scriptures, traditions, beliefs and creedal formulations. Valid and carefully adduced evidence is in short supply. (See Steven Weinberg's essay: 'Without God' in the 'New York Review of Books'. 25 September 2008 pp 73 – 76).

I emphasise the point which I made earlier. The simple fact that we each, personally and culturally, have used some of the same words and language structures all our lives and that these words and language structures have long cultural histories behind them does not mean that the words are intrinsically valid as descriptors of reality – physical or

metaphysical. Longevity of ideas and words is not a good criterion of validity. Language, as with numerous other frequently used behaviours, becomes an uncritical, unreflective and even unconscious habit. This very fact, allied to language as a major source of identity and meaning, suggests that we find it difficult to criticise our use of language because at the same time we are, by implication, criticising our identities, our cultures and our meanings. We are also implicitly criticising our ideological, theological and religious beliefs. There's more to language than meets the eye – and the 'more' is disturbing.

My three main propositions below will be construed, I suspect, as being essentially counter intuitive. That's one reason why an opening quotation was the strange sounding view of the Nobel Laureate Neils Bohr.

Human nature(s), irrationality and the 'common good'.

My basic propositions are as follows:

1   There is no such universal 'thing' as human nature.

2   Human beings can only be minimally rational – mostly we are inevitably irrational.

3   We cannot know what we have in common nor, therefore, what is commonly good.

In discussing these three propositions I shall also try to establish some links between them. In other words I shall try to establish that if there is no such 'thing' as human nature, and if we are only minimally rational, then we should be very sceptical about the commonly accepted view that there is a 'common good'.

1   There is no such universal 'thing' as human nature.

'Being human' is actually a very tricky concept. What do we actually mean *when we so readily speak of 'human nature'? After all, 'human' disenfranchises all other species in the animal kingdom. While 'nature' suggests a homogeneity and ubiquity in time and space.*(Greenfield 2008 p 135).

Greenfield's book is an interesting exploration of what she sees as significant, and significantly different, senses of self which are consequences of the kinds of culture, technological and otherwise, in which identities develop. Her approach supports my view that the very fact that human beings develop radically different senses of 'self' and 'identity' indicates that there is no single, defining, universal experience of what it is to be human. I have produced my own list of what I call my current assumptions, puzzlements and propositions about what I loosely call 'my self'. I can readily accept that the list below (p 22 ff) is a 'secular western' list and that other cultures/religions may

well construct a different kind of list. In so far as different kinds of culturally dependent lists could be drawn up that seems fairly convincing evidence that there is no such universal 'entity' as 'human nature' but that there is a variety of such natures. This is because, in spite of belonging to the same biological, genetic, evolutionary species, it is the size, structure and multiple functioning of our brains which enable our creation of languages and cultures. (Marcus 2008). We have very different culturally constructed senses of what our 'being in the world' might mean to us. Not only that. But even within a supposedly homogeneous culture there are significantly *individual differences* in the constructions of meaning. A view which seems persuasive to me is that there is no uniform, static, singular, normative, universal, essential way of 'being in the world'. No 'homogeneity and ubiquity' in Greenfield's terms.

Clocksin argues the same point:

Because development occurs throughout an organism's life, its identity is never fixed or foreclosed . . . identity can never be understood as a prior given, even if an organism may understand it (that is, endorses a meta-narrative from a culture that names it) as such. (p 110). *Human identity is thus seen as an historical contingency constituted in part by policies articulated by the social group, rather than as an underlying cognitive nature of the individual brain or as a realization of ideal goals.* p 118). (Clocksin in Cornwell 1998).

Amartya Sen's book (2006): *Identity and Violence: The illusion of destiny* is a careful critique of the dangerous, seductive and psychologically invalid notion of a singular sense of identity. He also explores some of the conflicts which ensue when people subjugate their multiple identities into the fantasy of a singular religious, national or cultural identity. If you are not totally like me (us) in my singular identity then you are 'the other'. As such you are deficient. You may be defined as 'evil', unsaved, even irredeemable. You may therefore have to be excluded, oppressed, humiliated – and in the last resort 'we' may have to kill you. Another way of putting it: if you do not use our language and believe in our beliefs then we consider that you have serious existential deficits and problems.

Sen's is a crucial and well argued position and is in line not only with philosophical thought but also with research in psycho-neuro-biology.

There are, of course, some defining characteristics of 'human nature' which arise from our evolution as a distinct species. It would be surprising if this were not the case. There are evidently species-specific behavioural and genetic characteristics for all species. We use these to identify the distinct biological species.

In our own case *Homo sapiens*:   We need to relate to others in order to create a sense of tribal identity and security;   we tend to create hierarchies and icons;   we develop languages which are impenetrable to other language speakers; we develop music, visual arts and tools;   we develop complex and very different cultures; we create diverse, conflicting and grandiose myths and meta-narratives about our origins and purposes

which enhance our sense of significance; we develop taboos around people, places, activities, topics; we create meanings around pain and illness and we tend to develop notions of cause and effect in relation to these and other events; we create meanings for our existence and meanings for events; we create rituals around birth, death, procreation and families; we need food, shelter, security and we create norms and rituals around these needs; we create beliefs, values and norms; we create ways of avoiding or destroying predators; we kill huge numbers of our own species for non-food reasons; we have a tendency to attribute causal agency to objects and events which we do not understand – we anthropomorphise. There is an extensive list of what Brown (in Pinker 2002 pp 435 – 439) calls *'surface universals of behaviour'*. These *'surface universals'* are those which pertain to *Homo sapiens* as studied by biologists and anthropologists.

But it is significant that these general features do not include the various *specific myths, distinct meanings and meta-narratives* which cultures create: the values which they espouse and the belief systems which develop; the criteria for group inclusion/exclusion; the goals for living which they assert; the different mythical cosmic and personal teleologies which are constructed; the meanings of life and being-in-the-world which are deeply embedded in these diverse culturally constructed meta-narratives. These culturally constructed meta-narratives sometimes overlap and sometimes are in deep conflict with each other.

I suggest that these specific myths, distinct meanings and meta-narratives are what Edelman (2006) terms 'second nature' by which he means: *To nature we must add the products of second nature. A fully reductive scientific explanation of that nature and its ethics and aesthetics is not desirable, likely, or forthcoming. Cultural factors play a large role in determining beliefs, desires and intentions. As Richerson and Boyd have pointed out, human evolution is accompanied by the co-evolution of culture, which provides a relatively rapid and powerful means of change affecting the bases of knowledge, feeling, and behaviour.* (p 66).

It therefore follows, I think, that there is no *deep singular sense* of universal human nature as compared to the species - specific similarities of *'surface universals'*. I suspect that 'human nature' is yet another loose and lazy term which we think we understand but which is frequently used to obscure the fact that we assume that it refers to a sort of mystical and mythical universal nature which we all share. We need to distinguish between biology and culture in this and other instances. (Rose 2005). We also need to be wary of reifying entities such as 'human nature' which should be seen as process and potential rather than entity.

'One of the most significant facts about us', wrote the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, *'may be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but in the end having lived only one'.* (Ingold in Rose and Rose (eds) 2000 p 225).

2   Human beings can only be minimally rational – mostly we are necessarily irrational.

We can be rational on a good day but much of the time we are not. (Marcus 2008 p 71).

And what you do not know is the only thing you know. T S Eliot. Four Quartets: 'East Coker'.

My second proposition may also seem strange. When I said, some years ago to the philosophical friend with whom I have ongoing discussions, that I was not rational, he replied: *You would not want to be called irrational would you ?* I have thought quite a lot about his humorous question. So, too, did Bertrand Russell who said: *It has been said that man is a rational animal. All my life I have been searching for evidence which could support this.* (Quoted in Marcus 2008 p1).

The more I read of neurobiological research into the brain's structure and function the more problematic becomes the notion of a well designed rational brain and therefore of a rational mind. (I need to say that I assume that mind is a function of the brain and not distinct Cartesian brain/mind dualism). I will mention four main books which have recently influenced my own thinking on the issue of the 'irrational' mind.

Rose (2005) describes in fascinating detail some of the latest work on the ways in which the brain seems to function. He titles his book: *The 21st Century Brain. Explaining, mending and manipulating the mind.* Not only does he make the important point that brains are always changing, moment to moment by multiple neuronal activities, but that they are also deeply and unavoidably influenced by their environment. This environment includes, of course, the culture in which a particular brain is embedded.

If, as I have argued, the brain cannot be understood except in a historical context, how much more so is it the case that our understanding of the brain cannot itself be understood except in its historical context. Our knowledges are contexted and constrained, so that the questions and the answers that seem self-evident to us   today were not so in the past and will not be in the future. Nor would we see things as we do had the sciences themselves developed in a different socio-cultural framework. The search for 'truth' about the material world cannot be separated from   the   social context in which it is conducted. (Chapter titled: 'What we know, what we might know and what we can't know',   in Rose 2005 pp 189-190).

Thus Rose argues that brains themselves *in their very neuronal development are culturally shaped*. Nature and nurture become neuronally intertwined in the brain structure. That, to me, is perhaps the most fascinating result of his research. It goes some way to explaining why it is difficult for us to 'change our minds'. Beliefs, values, language, ideas become embedded in our neurons and brain functioning. Minds are not free-floating entities. Minds are functions of brains and cultures. (See Greenfield 2008 in particular the chapter on: 'The Believing Brain' pp 211 – 231).

In addition to the work just quoted there is another observation which has impressed me ever since I first read it. It relates closely to the points made by Rose on the ways in which our cultural environment actually structures the developing brain. Language is a crucial aspect of our cultural environment. Rorty's (1989) book had the effect of changing my way of thinking about philosophy and my way of understanding myself and the world. He is addressing the problems of language in the chapter titled: 'The Contingency of Language'. Just one intriguing quotation:

The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that. . . languages are made rather than found. (pp 6 and 7).

Van Fraassen (2008) notes: *Our words sometimes have a disturbing plasticity.* (167).

These observations imply that the notion that we can rationally and linguistically understand ourselves and the world is impossible. Neither our brains nor the rest of the world speak to us. We speak to them and about them, as it were. A further consequence is that we can never access 'the truth' of things. There can never be total correspondence between words and other symbols which we ourselves create and the world as it is in itself of which we are trying to make sense. We cannot know whether our words are a total fit with and representation of the world. It is, I suggest, irrational to suppose that there could be total correspondence between language and world. There will always be an unbridgeable Kantian gap between our constructions of the world and the world as it is in itself – between phenomena and noumena. Of course, we may *believe* that our language is a source of objective truths but beliefs tend to confuse us in these and other matters. In this context, Davidson (2004) poses a crucial question: *How have we come to be able to appreciate the fact that our beliefs may be false, that there is a basic difference between what we believe and what is the case?* (p4).

Reverting to the 'human nature' issue, Rose's book is strong evidence that there is not a universal homogeneous human nature in cultural terms. But in relation to my second proposition any attempt at being rational comes up against two major problems. The first is that different cultures will have different notions of what being rational entails – and also that these different cultural notions will become structured into the brain's neuronal structure. The second is that the deep ways in which the brain operates is out of our awareness and is not accessible to us. We think *with* our brains but we cannot think *about* our brains other than what we learn from others' research into brain structure and function. Neurobiologists speak in terms of three major forms of brain structure: the reptilian, the mammalian and the neo-cortex – the triune brain. All three interact in deeply unconscious ways arising from our evolution. We cannot know whether our brains in their totality function in a rational way – or even whether our brains function coherently.

Two quotations from Rose – both of which I find deeply puzzling but well worth thinking about and each of which impacts on notions of a rational brain:

Organisms are analogue, not digital. (p 62). *Today's brain is not yesterday's and will not be tomorrow's.* (p 147).

As Heraclitus might have said: you never step in the same brain twice.

The fact that we think with our brains but cannot think introspectively about our own brains, has perhaps been the source of brain/mind dualism in both philosophical and general assumptions. The mind and our thinking do *seem* to be independent of the brain simply because we are not aware of the fact that it is the brain doing the thinking. My language is a function of my brain but I cannot use my language to think directly about my brain. It's only when neurobiology, along with studies of the influence on different kinds of thinking deficits resulting from brain lesions and chemical imbalances, explores the brain structures and processes that we begin to be aware of the fundamental role of the brain in our thinking. We can only know things about our brains from a third person perspective. I cannot know about my brain from a first person perspective. Of course, from a subjective first person point of view we become distressingly aware of the significance of the brain in the advent of Alzheimer's disease, as the result of stroke, brain tumour or as a result of chemical imbalance. Even so, these distressing symptoms do not enable the person to be aware of the precise causes of pathology by introspection.

We can therefore have no idea at all whether these unconscious and deep triune brain structures and processes are rational. Marcus (2008) provides a fascinating, stimulating, informative and often amusing discussion about the ways in which psychologists explore what Marcus calls the 'haphazard construction' of the brain. The existence of dreams – day and night, fantasies, imagination, the ubiquity of emotion in our way of being, acting on impulse, the complexity of our modes of perception and the ways in which our multimodal and shifting perception shapes our sense of the external world, our frustrating ability to forget and to mis-remember, our deep prejudices and so on all suggest to me that thinking and behaving consistently and rationally is not an option. Added to which there are the numerous sources of brain damage, large and small, to which we are prone – some of which we may not even be consciously aware. Of course we are sometimes capable of thinking and behaving rationally – by that I mean that we can observe aspects of cause and effect and try to act accordingly. We can try to imagine consequences of actions. We can ask: *What if . . .?* But all these 'rational' activities are difficult and the outcomes are not by any means always certain, necessarily rational or even desirable.

We <u>can</u> be rational on a good day but much of the time we are not. (p 71) *Rationality, pretty much by definition, demands a thorough and judicious balancing of evidence, but the circuitry of mammalian memory simply isn't attuned to that purpose. The speed and context-sensitivity of memory no doubt helped our ancestors, who had to make snap decisions in a challenging environment. But in modern times, this former asset has become a liability. When context tells us one thing, but rationality another, rationality often loses.* (Marcus 2008 p 84).

The many scientific methodologies which have been developed over quite long periods of time are evidence of sustained and changing attempts to explore the world rationally – and of some benefits of trying to do so. As I make that statement it emphasises for me that it is not easy to define clearly what we might mean by 'rational'. As I suggested above this often means that we try to discover processes around cause and effect in a variety of contexts and *a thorough and judicious balancing of evidence.* All with the intention of increasing prediction, control over events, processes and outcomes.

Martin Rees, Professor of Astronomy at the University of Cambridge and President of the Royal Society, has written an important essay in the new York Review of Books (20 November 2008 pp 41 – 44) titled: 'Science: The Coming Century'. In it he identifies some of the most significant scientific discoveries of the 20th century and, whilst indicating some of the advantages of these, carefully indicates some of the enormous disadvantages and potentially disastrous unintended consequences. These include terrorist uses of atomic bombs and bio/chemical threats to vast swathes of people by terrorists. He also spells out some implications of global warming which results directly from scientific discoveries and their 'irrational' use. Rational exploration of the natural world and apparently rational utilisation of the results is by no means a guarantee that the short, medium and long term consequences and goals will either be desirable or rational.

As a result of all this I conclude that my friend's humorous question was not simply rhetorical and I conclude that I am not rational. I would sense that those who know me well would concur !

A second book which has influenced my thinking is one to which I have already referred by Edelman (2006): *Second Nature: Brain science and human knowledge.* He is a Nobel Laureate (Physiology and Medicine) and explores ways in which philosophy, consciousness and neurophysiology might be combined. His work on consciousness and epistemology is a major focus of his project. He coined the term: *'brain based epistemology'* to indicate that all knowing is brain-based. There are enormous implications and consequences embedded in what might be seen as a rather self-evident statement.

'(brain based epistemology') *simply refers to the fact that all of the brain mechanisms we have discussed arose during the evolution of Homo sapiens. This may seem trivially obvious but it has some profound implications. One is that the brain, as a fundamental structure for elaboration of knowledge, was not designed for knowledge. Evolution is powerful and opportunistic, but is neither intelligent nor instructionistic. . . once language emerged in human evolution, our knowledge and its development, as well as our evolutionary path, depended on culture.* (pp 54 – 55).

It's an interesting paradox that the immensely careful, detailed and informative research into brain structure and functioning – which could be construed as a rational project – reveals a brain which is not only incomprehensibly complex but also subject to anything but rational activities. Given that consciousness arises from the multiple and sometimes conflictual dynamics of the brain, then even consciousness itself is not a rational

activity. Consciousness arises from unavoidable unconscious processes of which we are not aware and over which we probably have no control. It is even difficult to say what consciousness 'is'. (See Cornwell (ed) 1998 and Humphrey 2006. This latter book is particularly interesting because Humphrey takes what seems to be a 'simple case' of 'seeing red' and subjects it to careful philosophical analysis using current psychological research to assist in the task). In this context it's also worth noting that while consciousness is dependent upon the rest of the brain's functioning, consciousness itself is only a miniscule aspect of that complex functioning.

The relatively recent evolutionary development of the cortex and frontal lobes seems to be crucially related to our consciousness, language, context awareness and reflective capacities. Any capacity for rational thought seems to be located in this new cortex, but never in isolation from the influences of deeper and older structures of the brain. We simply cannot avoid these deep and influential drives, motivations, needs, structures and functions of the unconscious brain. Descartes' mind/ body dualism is premised on the *a priori* existence of a rational God, who created a rational universe and who created rational human minds which could understand the rational universe. Given the progress in brain research on structure and function this form of dualistic based rationalism with its implicit assumptions of confident and rational epistemology is not on. The brain evolved, it was not designed. As Edelman said, epistemology is brain based. It's not mind based.

A third book which I found both relevant and interesting is that by Greenfield (2008): *i.d. The Quest for Identity in the 21st Century.* She is Professor of Pharmacology at Oxford University and Director of the Royal Institution. One of her themes is the vulnerability of the brain to massive changes induced by drugs, lesions, emotional surges, internal changes in biochemistry. Greenfield's major research project is to try to understand and possibly cure and prevent Alzheimer's disease. Her monistic approach to brain/mind indicates the collapse of Cartesian dualism – a dualism which, however, still seems to reflect our conscious 'experience'. This is yet another example of what we think of as being the case not being the case. Science frequently challenges 'common sense'. She says:

But the exciting, truly central, issue is this: the brain sciences are now demonstrating that there is no distinction between mental and physical events, that every thought has a physical correlate, even if we understand poorly as yet the precise nature of that correlation, and even more remotely its causal relationship. For me personally, even just challenging the old dichotomy of mind versus brain, of mental versus physical, is one of the most important achievements of current neuroscience. (p 50).

I assume that she would agree with Edelman's notion of brain-based epistemology.

One consequence of this collapse of dualism into monism is, as I indicated above, that the very concept 'rationality' is not at all easy to define in clear and consistent ways. A basic 'rationalist' assumption is that there are causal relationships between what may seem like disparate events. Added to which is the assumption that the human mind is so constructed

that it is capable of understanding these causal relationships and of basing 'rational' human action on this understanding with the aims of increasing prediction and control. Science is necessarily premised on this causal assumption but my sense is that people's ways of being, believing and thinking are not necessarily causal – that is they are not necessarily rational in terms of prediction and control in terms of consequences.

My sense of the problems of rational thought and behaviour have necessarily needed to include the effects of emotion. Damasio's (1999) book influenced my thinking on the role of emotion in thought and action. ' . . . *work from my laboratory has shown that emotion is integral to the process of reasoning and decision-making, for worse and for better. This may sound a bit counterintuitive, at first, but there is evidence to support it.* (p 41). The fundamental and unavoidable influence of emotion on all aspects of human being and cognition makes a simplistic notion of rational thought and behaviour untenable. Thus our beliefs are infused with emotions and sometimes with minimal or no evidence. As Greenfield notes: *'When you believe in something, you are going beyond what your senses tell you'.* (p 233).

'Going beyond what your senses tell you' is taken up in the article by Brooks ('New Scientist' 2009) in which he explores ways in which the structure of the brain may predispose us to adopt supernatural beliefs. *'The ability to conceive of gods, however, is not sufficient to give rise to religion. The mind has another essential attribute: an overdeveloped sense of cause and effect which primes us to see purpose and design everywhere, even where there is none'.* (p32).

The fourth main book is from a very different perspective. My reading of Rosenblum and Kuttner (2007) on quantum mechanics and consciousness convinced me of two things. One: I do not understand quantum mechanics – but then these experts do not either. Their level of misunderstanding is deeper than my level of misunderstanding ! Indeed the authors make the point that anyone who claims to understand quantum mechanics has not comes to grips with its complexity. Two: what I did understand was that fundamentally nothing is certain. '(quantum) *theory seems to tell us that the reality of the physical world depends on our observation of it. This is surely almost impossible to believe'* (p 52). *'Quantum mechanics forces us to accept that the mechanistic Newtonian view of the world – and the intuitions fostered by it – are fundamentally flawed.* (p 155).

Our ways of observing the world and the attempts which we make to understand it are unavoidably related to our own embodied way of being but that does not mean that the world is the ways in which our embodied brains perceive it to be. They go on to say: *Arguably, the reason why we observe only states characterized by unique positions is that we humans are beings who can experience only position (and time). Speed, for example, is position at two different times. When we see things with our eyes, it is because of light on particular positions on our retina. We feel by touch the position of something on our skin; we hear by the changing positions of our eardrums; we smell by the effects on certain receptor positions in our nose. We therefore build our measuring instruments to display their results in terms of position – typically that of a meter pointer or a light*

pattern on a screen. Nothing in quantum theory forces this situation. We humans seem constructed in a special way. (p 187).

It being the case that even in physics all is fundamentally degrees of probability I conclude that therefore the notion of my own thoughts and actions being rational – that is understanding the (assumed) essential and stable nature of causality and consequences - stands little chance. The more deeply we explore 'things as they are' at the quantum level the less rational and more insolubly puzzling 'things' become. For example it's not easy to make sense of multiple and parallel universes. Things only *seem* fairly consistent and predictable at the Newtonian level of magnitude – which is not without benefits – one of which is our very existence as embodied beings. But there is no certainty here either. Life is inherently risky and our planet and the cosmos are essentially unstable. Stray comets sometimes hit our planet with massive and detrimental results for all life. These risks allied to inherent instability in terms of the physical nature of things ensure that we cannot behave rationally or with certainty. Perhaps the considerable effort which we put into trying to create stability is evidence of the ubiquity of instability – what Iris Murdoch called the 'rubble' of life. The apparent, relative, stability of reality is entirely dependent on the ways in which our sensory modalities are constructed. In addition, our beliefs and theories about reality also shape our perception of that reality.

Of course, the complex and sustained work of scientists and their technologies enhance our perceptual abilities they influence our beliefs, our actions and aspirations – sometimes in dramatic ways. For example the Copernican revolution, Darwin's theory of evolution, Einstein's theory of time/space relativity and the explorations of geneticists and neurobiologists. Technosciences also provide us with some degree of prediction and control. These may seem 'permanent' but that's only because of the limited time-scale within which we live and exist.

Over time, and with increasing knowledge, changes in the ways in which we represent reality are a complex and existentially influential. Van Fraassen (2008) deals in great detail with the problems of representation and measurement in science and includes interesting observations about the general problems we have with linguistic and other forms of symbolic representation in our engagement with aspects of reality. Representation whether verbal, pictorial, computer graphics or mathematical, is always a form of construction. ' . . . *representation useful for particular purposes will involve selective distortion, and representation is closely involved with useful misrepresentation'.* (p 87)

My summary of the 'rationality' problem is as follows. The vast majority of our brain functioning is totally out of our awareness and is inaccessible to individual awareness and reflection. Our notions of 'rational' change over time and across cultures but memory, with all its complexity, is crucial to any notions of rationality. We do not understand why memories are stored, how memories are stored, how memories change over time, how memories are retrieved, how memories are utilised. We do know that memory is never simple retrieval of historical facts as they actually happened. Memory is always a present act of reconstruction. And, of course, memory is vulnerable – not least to the irritating

phenomenon known as forgetting. (Halpern 2008). The notion that reality is rational and rationally comprehensible, and yet our representations of it are essentially based on fluctuating human memory, is very problematic and contentious.

My conclusion from these studies and from observations of how I operate in relation to myself, other people and the world, is that my behaviour and thought never could be deemed purely rational. Most of the time I seem to be irrational because emotions and my beliefs are unavoidable and significant influences in all my thinking and being. Indeed, I cannot conceive of what it would be like to be simply and solely rational. My problems would be compounded by the fact that the world in which I live is neither totally predictable or controllable nor, therefore, totally rational. Total rationality would be neither an evolutionary nor personal advantage not least because reality itself is not stable. My brain – reptilian, mammalian and neo-cortical - is not based on rational design but on evolutionary and random complexity which is not necessarily integrated or coherent in any intentionally rational sense. But for most of the time I make my way around the physical and interpersonal worlds using my understandings which are susceptible to change. I sometimes get it profoundly wrong ! And there's illness, accidents and unexpected events which can seriously destabilise my understandings. In spite of my friend's implicit confidence in my rationality, I have to own up to being irrational.

3   We cannot know what we have in common nor, therefore, what is commonly good.

Myth *'abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences'* creating *'a world wide open and wallowing in the evident – a blissful clarity'*. Barthes (1957*).*

There's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so. Hamlet.

It may well be the case that we cannot avoid myth making because we cannot access reality directly. However we need to be aware of the seductive simplicities of our myths with their *blissful clarity* – particularly when our myths become transformed into metanarratives. I propose that 'common good' is a myth deriving from inappropriate assumptions about 'common human nature' and 'rationality'.

To the extent to which the arguments and evidence indicated above are valid then there can be no consensus on 'the common good'. The additional evidence which persuades me of this is as follows.

- Religions differ within and between themselves on ideas of 'the good' and how 'the good' should be applied to real people in their diversity. They also define human nature in different and conflicting ways.

- Political ideologies and political parties similarly disagree on 'the good', hence the range of political parties even within democracies. This political/ideological diversity suggests lack of a common view on the 'common good'.

- My many conversations with groups and individuals in a western context also suggest that whilst there tend to be some agreements there are also disagreements on the idea of the 'common good'. There are serious disagreements about who decides what is 'good' and what is 'common' about it. Disagreements about 'the good' can all too frequently result in conflict.

There are many views about the 'common good' but consensus on the 'common good' there is not. It verges on the elusive vagueness of 'common sense'.

If there is no consensus on 'the good' then an important consequence of this lack of uniformity, for me, is that it is unlikely that there can be a universal definition of the 'common good'. I actually find it rather strange to say that. My own upbringing and much subsequent thinking was the opposite of this notion. I now think that there is neither a common definition of the essential 'nature' of people nor, therefore, a common definition of what is 'good' for them. Assumptions of 'common humanity' and 'common good' are often theological or ideological hegemonic assertions which are driven by the need to control and dominate, to include and exclude – a theological/ideological 'us' and 'them'.

A recent example of this ideological hegemony of inclusion/exclusion is the assertion that all states 'need' democracy and freedom which are assumed to be necessarily 'good' and clearly understood to be 'good'. Thus, morally armed on the moral high ground, the 'coalition of the willing' invaded Afghanistan and then Iraq to *impose* an Orwellian 'democracy' and 'freedom'. In the latter case it was made explicit that freedom and democracy would, unfortunately, be preceded by a period of 'Shock and Awe'. This actually meant that many Iraqis would be killed and that their physical, political, cultural, archaeological and physical infrastructure would be destroyed along with their social fabric. (See 'New York Review of Books' 14 August 2008 pp 37 – 40). USA and UK leaders did not seem to appreciate the fundamental contradiction in this invasion to 'bring' democracy. In the case of Afghanistan the rather bizarre name of the venture is: 'Enduring Freedom'.

The Israeli/Palestinian conflict is yet another tragic demonstration of the difficulty of agreeing on 'the common good'.

It is clearly the case that some states, cultures and groups evidently *do not want* such drastic changes to their political, cultural and social structures and resent and resist attempts to impose these. It is also increasingly clear to me that the terms 'democracy' and 'freedom' are not only very complex but are themselves not essentialist terms. That is they are not terms which define the essence of human nature. They suffer from the difficulties we have with all abstract nouns. One of these difficulties is that abstract nouns are used loosely – they are what I call 'lazy' concepts. They do not have a single, agreed,

immutable set of meanings because abstract nouns are necessarily culturally constructed. Famous examples are: truth, beauty, justice. Another obvious example: democracy in the USA is not the same as democracy in the UK. Even notions of freedom are different in these two (similar) cultures – separated, as George Bernard Shaw famously observed, by a common language. Having recently taken part in a debate of the topic: *Does God exist?* at a university Islamic Society I am confirmed in my view that the term 'God' is yet another example of a 'lazy' concept. 'Lazy' but assumed to be a 'fact' which is perhaps the reason for 'lazy' thinking.

'Common good' is not an ultimate, universal, metaphysical, theological, ideological or teleological value which transcends the pragmatic notion of 'good' which different groups at different times define as 'good' in terms which suit their interests and purposes. Steven Rose (2005) puts the issue as follows:

. . . as I continue to emphasise, the dialectical nature of our existence as biosocial beings means that our technologies help shape who we are, reconstructing our very brains; as technology shifts so do our concepts of personhood, of what it means to be human.
(p 303). (See also Rorty 1989 on 'pragmatism').

Even human rights are not necessarily equivalent to the ultimate 'common good'. As Klug (2000) perceptively points out: *'Behind this claim (of universalism) lies both the allure and potential nemesis of the idea of human rights. . . But within this achievement lies a familiar trap. If the human rights message were, through its own success, to metamorphose from an evolving framework into a fully fledged ideology which closes down debate rather than opens it, then the human rights project is likely to go the way of other failed utopias of the last century'.* (p 209). (See also Preece 2005 and Gray 2007). That's why I indicated that 'human rights' are in danger of becoming a meta-narrative. Lyotard's warning is apposite.

One further consequence, for me, of my assumption that there is no common 'human nature' and therefore of no 'common human good' is that human beings are incapable of arriving at consensus as to *meaning* but are unavoidably confronted with diversity, difference and therefore various forms of conflict in relation to their respective meanings. Peaceful utopian consensus on common 'human nature', 'common good' and 'common meaning' is a fantasy. *'Those who are crushed and broken in order to create a higher humanity, who are killed or mutilated in acts of spectacular terror or ravaged in wars for universal freedom may have ideas about their place in the world altogether different from those they are assigned in the dramas that are being enacted. If universal narratives create meaning for those who live by them, they also destroy it in the lives of others . . . At its best, politics is not a vehicle for universal projects but the art of responding to the flux of circumstances'.* (Gray 2007 p 205 and 210).

Conflicting stances on the nature of human nature are not limited to war. The current different approaches to stem cell research and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis, with a view to producing 'saviour siblings' and also to allow putative parents the option of choosing a genetically healthy child, is another issue of conflict in which consensus

seems impossible to achieve because views about human nature are not commonly held. To the extent to which these issues require legislation, one view will necessarily dominate to the exclusion of the other.

From my point of view we have the significant emergence of what Klug (2000) describes as the 'three waves of human rights'. (See also Gearty's (2007) important book: 'Civil Liberties'). I do not wish to indicate a rejection of the importance of these efforts to establish 'universal rights' and liberties – indeed I applaud the attempts because they are in accord with my value system. However, I do want to indicate that these rights are not actually universal – some nations and states were not and are not signatories. These 'universal rights' are also are fragile even for signatory states. The US administration has recently reneged on some aspects of the Geneva Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as did the UK government by the use of internment without due process. Also in the case of the US by the use of torture and 'extraordinary rendition' – seemingly with the collusion of the UK government.

Sadly, it often seems as if the 'good' of the individual or the 'good' of the particular state overrides the 'general good'. Even the utilitarian notion of the greatest good of the greatest number is vulnerable to collapse into the good of the few (powerful and wealthy) at the expense of the many – or of 'the others'. 'Axis of evil' comes to mind as does the collapse of the financial system. To the extent to which we continue to define people as belonging to exclusive groups – 'us' and 'them' – we shall fail to treat all our fellow human beings as 'us'.

Phillipe Sands' latest book (2008) provides distressing evidence of the ways in which 'civilised' states can lapse into cruelty and compromise of the law particularly when they feel threatened. In such cases 'they' can be demeaned, degraded, excluded, de-humanised.

It seems to me that one of the insoluble, or at least very problematic, sources of difference and conflict is between those who hold significantly different beliefs in assumed forms (myths and meta-narratives) of the 'essential nature' of human existence and therefore of individual lives. On the one hand most religious traditions, in their orthodox mode, seem to adopt an 'essentialist' stance on human existence. This was the stance forwarded by the Catholic Church to oppose the recent stem cell/abortion/pre-implantation genetic diagnosis debate. I note that the Roman Catholic bishop Illinois has objected to the invitation given by the Notre Dame (RC) University of Illinois to President Obama to speak at the university's graduation ceremony on 17 May 2009.
Bishop John D'Arcy said that he would not attend because of Obama's policies. This on the grounds that the President is in favour of abortion and stem cell research. There is a tradition in this university that new Presidents are given such an invitation.

Religions which are manifestly homophobic and misogynistic adopt essentialist views of heterosexual human nature and this essentialism results in the exclusion of women and gays from 'essentially unsuitable' religious functions and sexually fulfilling intimate relationships. This version of essentialism is, of course, patriarchally and heterosexually

constructed in order to maintain male status, power and authority. A recent example of this is the vehement opposition to a Muslim woman, Professor Amina Wadud a Muslim scholar, preaching and conducting prayers in a mosque in Oxford on 17 October 2008 for the first time in Britain. In his opposition to this action the vice-president of the Muslim Association of Great Britain stated that: *'we* (men*) have to do it in the way it has been ordained by God to do it'.* He pointed out that Catholics do not allow women priests.

In the Islamic Society university debate to which I referred above I noted that women were directed to enter by the rear door of the lecture theatre and were required to sit at the back of the theatre. I did not comment at the time but presumably this was understood as the will of Allah.

Some religious traditions still believe in the obligation to convert others to their 'essentially' true way of thinking – and including the condemnation of those who will not convert or who decide to change their religious beliefs. Recently Hindus have killed Christians in India, burnt their houses and destroyed their churches. The opportunity to avoid these threats depended on the Christians' willingness to convert to Hinduism. Infidels and apostates are terms used to indicate essential flaws, failings and deficiencies.

On the other hand there are those who generally believe in developmental, divergent, emergent, multiple and mutable notion of human life and existence. Human nature is seen as a variable potential rather than a fixture. I put myself in this category. There are, I fear, irreconcilable differences between those who believe in revealed and immutable truths about 'essential' human nature and those who are committed to explore mutable possibilities for human nature followed by ethical decisions based on the best evidence to date.

Religions do not have a monopoly on the imposition of 'immutable' truths and of resistance to the investigative nature of the sciences with the consequent challenges to various orthodoxies. I listened to 'In Our Time' (BBC Radio 4, 5 June 2008) which was a discussion about the ways in which USSR political ideology colluded with the total adoption of Lysenko's (1898 – 1976) spurious views on biology and in particular agro-biology. Thousands of scientists who disagreed with Lysenko were killed or deported to the gulags. In the 'In Our Time' discussion a view was expressed that this collusion with false science, deriving from the need to impose the Communist ideology including social, economic and agricultural restructuring, was a major reason for the eventual collapse of the USSR.

Immutable truths are merely rhetorical symptoms of the needs of the powerful to exert control, but the imposition of the perception of rhetoric as 'truths' can have devastating effects. I believe that the myths which we create can all too easily become the repositories of ideology and power which we use to enhance our own sense of superiority and to denigrate the 'inferior' being of those who believe in different myths. Myth *'abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences'* creating *'a world wide open and wallowing in the evident – a blissful clarity'. Barthes* (1957). Whilst accepting the necessity of myths, they too easily become lazy ways of thinking

and acting. Clarity, whilst seductive, is always deceptive. Our certainties are our deceivers. The seductiveness of myths is motivated by our needs for security, familiarity, comfort and a sense of belonging to the dominant groups whose beliefs we share. Rejection, exclusion or excommunication are painful, demeaning and diminishing experiences. In some religions these states result in 'hell' for the excluded.

This leads me to the following view. The most which I think we can hope for is that we constantly seek ways of managing differences and conflicts within frameworks of agreed processes of dialogue. Learning how to live with our differences in ways which do not result in mutual destruction, exclusion, rejection, humiliation, tyranny and oppression is enough of a challenge by comparison with attempting an unachievable utopian consensus based on the assumption that we are 'all the same under the skin'. Myths tend to deal in the delusional simplicity of essences. It is my own view that this process of managing differences and conflicts is most appropriately undertaken within a secular, democratic system. It is this system which creates the space for differences. It is also freedom of speech which underpins this space for differences. It is in democracies that critical dialogue can take place and which gives the democratic process its validation. Theocracies and totalitarian ideologies are not noted for critical dialogue and freedom of speech.

Free speech is a condition of legitimate government. Laws and policies are not legitimate unless they have been adopted through a democratic process and a process is not democratic if government has prevented anyone from expressing his convictions about what those laws and policies should be. . . No one's religious conviction can be thought to trump the freedom that makes democracy possible. Ronald Dworkin, Professor of Jurisprudence. 'New York Review of Books' 23 March 2006.

One further thought. It seems paradoxical to me that the more we seek to value our diversity the greater the problems and conflicts which our diversities seem to produce. I am in favour of the term 'multiculturalism' – it seems to be a concept which captures the experienced reality of a complex, ethnically varied and multi-faceted nation state - but it could be construed as inevitably producing serious problems of conflict rather than cooperative solutions. Then there is the issue of global multi-polarity . . .

There is, I suggest,   no ultimate solution to the human condition. Our only option is to try to make the best of it. *At its best, politics is not a vehicle for universal projects but the art of responding to the flux of circumstances'.* (Gray 2007 p. 210).

Second Life and First Life.

One aspect of my recent stimulating and confusing discussion on virtual Second Life focused on whether it might be possible to 'duplicate' my 'self' via the virtual Second Life of the internet. Reference was also made to the distinction between 'replication' and 'duplication' and to the possibility of an 'eternal' Second Life ! As I said, it was a stimulating and confusing conversation. In other words, can my sense of being human, my identity, be virtually relocated ? *They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old*

Age shall not weary them. . . . .' for at least as long as the computer does not crash. (See Greenfield 2008 chapter on: 'Being Nobody').

I began to take Second Life more seriously when I read the article in the magazine 'The Therapist' for counseling and psychotherapy professionals. (November 2008. Vol. 19. No.9 pp 5 – 9). This article explores reports of Second Life relationships and the meanings which these had for the participants. Whilst completing written work for her counselling diploma Mary reported that she spent between one and five hours a day in Second Life. *'I was escaping into Second Life but used it to explore things that have actually transformed into life-changing opportunities for me now. . . I was finding this space where I could really get that thrill that was missing in my life'.* The article recognizes that therapists need to be aware of the opportunities, problems and confusions which clients experience in their Second Life explorations. Tim Guest's book (2008) is mentioned in the article. He researched the Second Life potential for 'a group on nine men and women with severe cerebral palsy and mental retardation who, through the medium of technology, have found the means to transcend their restricted real – world selves to achieve freedom of movement and expression in Second Life'. ('The Therapist' Vol. 19. No 19. p 8). However, it does seem that therapists are taking the therapeutic possibilities of Second Life seriously.

It is also reported that the Anglican Church has established an i – church. Transcendence will never be the same again.

All this calls into ever more complicated questioning the reality and meanings which we give to what one might now have to call First Life.

After the discussion to which I referred above, I wrote the first version of the following list. It contains what I think might be the characteristics of human beings' sense of their 'being in the world' otherwise known as their sense of self. However, it may be a merely western secular list – indeed it may merely be my own idiosyncratic list. It's also a First Life list not least because I have yet to come to terms with Second Life implications for my First Life 'realities'. I still have difficulties in coming to terms with my First Life. One of the difficulties which has recently arisen is whether my First Life list is a 'real' list or merely a 'virtual' list. Identity like reality is somewhat slippery.

In so far as you disagree with my list you might like to produce your own. It's my version of how I construe my 'human nature'. It indicates how I see my 'being in the world'.

This is a short list of my current assumptions, puzzlements and propositions about what I loosely call 'my self'. On reflection it's an interesting use of the possessive pronoun implying that there is that about 'me' which 'owns' my 'self' ! It's yet another example of how misled we can be by our use of language – Wittgenstein would perhaps agree.
I use the first person singular because the list is my list and it may not 'duplicate' other peoples' lists. It's an example of a meta-narrative within which I try to make some meaning out of my existence. I do not propose this list as being universally true. It's my

list. It seems reasonable to me – although I cannot claim that it is rational. (See Bouveresse (1995) on a useful distinction between 'reasons' and 'causes', Chapter 1V).

1   A sense of interiority and subjectivity which is only minimally and partially conscious but which seems to allows me some sense of control, choice and action. Interiority and subjectivity are linked to a sense of agency and privacy. My subjectivity arises from my essential relatedness and is the location of my being responsible for my actions and for my accountability to others in both personal and legal respects. The term 'location' also reminds me that I am located in a culture which has deeply shaped my sense of self, being and meaning.

2   When I introspect it seems as if it is in the area of my consciousness that I can attempt to be rational. I can try to establish what causes which effects. I try to foresee some consequences of my actions and those of others. I can try to think and express myself in careful, reasoned, reflective ways. I try to think, write and speak clearly. I can ask myself questions as well as being questioned by others. I can, in a manner of speaking, change my mind when confronted with what I deem to be persuasive evidence. But all this takes considerable effort and I am constantly diverted by prejudice, irrelevance, emotions, diversions and needs which seem to   interfere with my attempts to exercise reason.

3   A vague awareness of unconscious processes which influence my   consciousness: thoughts, imaginations, perceptions, fantasies, dreams (day and night), delusions, intuitions, intentions and actions. The vast majority of my brain/mind is unconscious – including my memory and the basis of my language. (See Damasio 1999 and Tye 2003). I am not even conscious of my brain until it becomes damaged. I think *with* my brain but I am unable to think *about* my brain.

      In fact, as I reflect on the words which I used above I am puzzled as to whether I would call terms such as 'consciousness, imagination, dreams' and so on 'virtual' or 'real'. It now makes me wonder whether thinking itself is not a virtual process. The next question is almost obvious: How do I distinguish between the 'virtual' and the 'real' ? (Cornwell (ed) 1998). Is a *word* virtual or real ?   I suspect that we use these two terms loosely.

4   A sense of a fragmented autobiographical narratives. I use 'fragmented' and the plural 'narratives' to indicate that in some important respects my sense of my being changes over time and in response to events, to age(ing) and to 'changes of mind'. It's also worth noting that my account of my narrative (who I am) depends in no small respect on the context in which I am talking and the people to whom I am talking. There seems to be a sense in which I construct 'fictions' in order to give some sort of continuity to my self. (See Blackburn (2006) for a brief discussion of 'fictions'. Also Greenfield (2008)).

      Necessary though memory is to autobiography memory is not a static and retrievable store of personal and historical facts. Memory is not a linear,

retrievable duplicate   of past events. Memory is a fallible process of construction and reconstruction. Memory is always the ways in which the brain is functioning in the present. Memory is famously unreliable. It does not have the hugely convenient but grossly simplistic recall powers of my computer. Although I do sometimes speak to – curse !! – my computer this is merely anthropomorphic projection. See also the interview chapter with Oliver Sacks 'The Hidden Self' in Margulis and Punset (eds) (2007).

5   A sense of past, present and future and therefore a sense of both existential and chronological time. My own sense is that existential time dominates chronological time. That is to say I have memory recall for significant events but this recall has
          a tendency to fuse into an emotional blur which is only loosely related to
the   chronology of the events. To put this succinctly: My personal memory (narrative) is a form of fusion of 'here and now' with a sense of personal history. In a profoundly important sense my personal history is always my sense of the present stored in my brain at this time. That is to say: my being is primarily existential rather than linear and chronological. My sense of past, present and future (whilst
          experienced in an on- going present) influence my sense of identity.

Brain damage and deterioration reduce or even destroy my memory and therefore dramatically change my sense of past, present and future. Such damage is deeply existentially damaging. My sense of self is very fragile. As Halpern (2008) observes in relation to Alzheimer's disease: *'And what if that self is one who can't remember itself ? What if the person you had been is only a memory . . . held by others?'*

All these terms and issues are problematic and become more so the more we think about them. Augustine says in 'The Confessions': *What, then, is time ? I know well enough what it is; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain I am baffled*. (Quoted in McGinn 1997 p 19 in her book: 'Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations'). I have every sympathy with Augustine on this one.

6   A sense of my being which is different from, but related to, others as they and I select and report this sense of their and my being. I am and we are necessarily relational. Relationships are unavoidably complex because we never share the same memories nor do we share the same sets of (temporary) meanings. We may culturally similar but we are certainly existentially different.

7   A sense of agency in relation to the external world. It is this agency in relation to the world, mediated by the culture in which I live, which provides me with various meanings which in turn create my sense of self and identity. Identity is not *sui generis* but culture/world/individual dependent.

I notice that subject/object is a difficult dualism to collapse (Cornwell (ed) 1998). There's also a sense of inner dialogue with myself. I talk to myself in my mind.

There is almost a sense of agency in relation to myself as well as to the external world. Edelman (2006) speaks of: '. . . *memory, imaging, and thought itself all depend of the brain 'speaking to itself" by re-entry'*. (57). (I addressed some aspects of these complex problems in Heath (2002).

8   A sense that my emotions are more basic to my being than my thinking and acting. They provide me with my initial and rapid response to the environment. They also underpin my consciousness. They infuse my attempts at being rational. I can neither ignore nor circumvent emotions. There is recent evidence that even before am conscious of the response which I 'wish' to make, my brain has already prepared an unconscious response.

        'The continuity of consciousness comes from the abundant flow of nonverbal narratives of core consciousness'. (Damasio 1999 p 176).   His work in neurology supports the notion of the primacy of the basic emotions of the neural system over conscious thought and action. He uses the term 'proto self' to describe these unconscious underlying processes. Rose (2005) supports this view: *'Emotions are evolved properties, and several neuroscientists have devoted considerable attention to the mechanisms and survival advantages of emotion'* p 102).

9   A sense of my being culturally embedded and culturally constructed. Culture is my source of language, beliefs, values and meanings and of course identity. My ability to be critically reflexive allows me to be aware, to some extent, of this cultural embeddedness. It also allows me to criticise and change that which I am – but only to a limited extent.

10   A sense of vulnerability and fragility. One worst case scenario is Alzheimer's in which I lose my sense of self, identity and memory. Another experience of this vulnerability occurs after some forms of stroke damage and serious accidents. The patient may lose some aspects of awareness and loss of memory and physical ability which destabilise the sense of self, agency and control. Yet another experience of this vulnerability is when I consider changing deeply held beliefs and values because I have become convinced that they are no longer appropriate for me. I addressed some of these issue in my book (2003) and in the paper: *Giving up God: Losses and gains. An existential audit.* *

11   My sense that people flourish when treated with respect, dignity, courtesy, kindness, challenge, support, encouragement, adequate resources, freedom to be creative and to choose old or new meanings for living and to change these without being threatened by those whose views differ. I therefore believe that forms of democracy encourage these potentials. A more detailed discussion of my values can be found in Heath (2003 pp 89 – 115).

* www.bowlandpress.com click on Seminar papers. It is also on the British Humanist Association website under that same title.

12   A sense that the more I reflect the less I think I know. I have concluded that our certainties are our deceivers. Vernon's (2007) book is, in part, a study of the

benefits of thoughtful ignorance stimulated by wonderment and curiosity. My ignorance is not generally debilitating but stimulating. However, sometimes my ignorance is scary, undermining and debilitating.

13   A sense of mortality. End of my sense of self and my being. Finito !!!!

Conclusion

As I do not know for certain who I am it is unlikely that my deep sense of identity can be stolen or otherwise relocated on to Second Life. I believe that I am human but I do not know for certain about my nature. I have no access to the underlying causes of my being. On the other hand it's with amused relief that I think that any identity thief will end up being as confused as I am – and serve him/her right. She got more than she bargained for !!

Downloading my brain/mind is unlikely to illuminate the human condition – it may simply add to the confusion of nations.

Perhaps retired boxers such as Mike Tyson should re-train as philosophical psychologists. Come to think of it, perhaps he did re-train.

He certainly sounds like a candidate for Second Life.

Geoff Heath
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