

# Consciousness, Mankind, Museums

François-Xavier Nève, University of Liège, DASA, Dortmund, April 9th, 2011

It has often been suggested that what differentiated man from animal was consciousness. Self consciousness or self-awareness. To be distinguished from conscience, but not separated. There cannot be conscience without consciousness—no one has any doubt about it. Perhaps some might argue that there could exist a consciousness without moral, or ethical, conscience, and responsibility. We will not discuss this here.

After the experiments conducted by Gordon G. Gallup, Jr. and others beginning in the late sixties,<sup>1</sup> it has been postulated that some apes, in particular orang-utans and chimpanzees, did develop self-awareness in adulthood. But oddly enough from our stand lost it in old age.<sup>2</sup> Gallup paints a dot of colour on the animal's forehead while it is asleep. When it wakes up, it is presented with a mirror. If it tries to remove the spot, Gallup states that it is aware of itself, i. e. self-conscious. I do not believe it to the extent that as far as I gather even the best trained chimps or orang-utans lag far behind a 2-two year old human child. As I now watch my granddaughter, who speaks and behaves much more like an adult human being than any grown up ape, even trained from birth in sign language with a human family, I'm afraid that she is not conscious of herself like we are until we die—except of course when we sleep, are drunk or drugged. And for Gallup's experiment, Capucine has recognized herself in the mirror for more than a year, long before she started speaking. I do not see why recognizing oneself in a mirror should be equivalent to being conscious. As far as I can remember, my oldest memories of myself date back to me fourth or fifth year of existence. The memories from before have been reconstructed from photographs and stories by my parents. I do not trust that friend of ours who claims that she remembers and can depict the meeting of her mother's egg and her father's spermatozoid to form her. No doubt I agree that unconscious memories dating as far back as around or even before birth may have been stored in brains. But precisely they are unconscious. Or subconscious. Not conscious.

It seems to me that indeed what characterizes our species is consciousness. And I observe that it arises between the ages of three and five or six. The Ancients called this age *the age of reason*. Clearly consciousness and reason go together.

What is consciousness, and what does it imply for us in museums today?

## **The four-sided pyramid of consciousness**

In an essay which I have not published yet but which I think should appear in French this year in Paris, *Le Parleur*, presumably in English *The Speaking Ape* to respond to Desmond Morris's famous *Naked Ape*,<sup>3</sup> I try to identify what is required for a consciousness to exist or work. French mathematician and philosopher Henri Bergson<sup>4</sup> has shown that consciousness consists in

<sup>1</sup> GALLUP, Gordon G., Jr., "Chimpanzees : Self-Recognition", *Science* 167, 1970, pp. 86-87 ; GALLUP, Gordon G., Jr., "On the Rise and Fall of Self-Conception in Primates", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 818, 1997, pp. 73-84 ; GALLUP, Gordon G., Jr., "Toward a comparative psychology of self awareness: species limitation and cognitive consequences", in GOETHALS, G. R. & STRAUSS, J., *The Self: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, New York : Springer Verlag, 1991

<sup>2</sup> Similar experiments were then conducted with other species like dolphins, killer whales and elephants, but they were not conclusive.

<sup>3</sup> MORRIS, Desmond, *Le Singe nu*, Paris : Grasset, 1968

<sup>4</sup> BERGSON, Henri, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France « Bibliothèque de Philosophie Contemporaine », 1951<sup>68</sup> ; BERGSON, Henri, *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*, Paris : Alcan, 1900 ; réédition 1959 aux Presses universitaires de France ; BERGSON, Henri, *Durée et simultanéité. À propos de la théorie d'Einstein*, Paris : Alcan, 1922 ; BERGSON, Henri, *Matière et mémoire*, Paris : PUF « Bibliothèque de Philosophie Contemporaine », 1951<sup>50</sup> ; BERGSON, Henri, *L'Évolution créatrice*, Paris : Alcan, 1951<sup>77</sup> ; BERGSON, Henri, *Les Deux Sources de la morale et de la religion*, Paris : PUF « Bibliothèque de Philosophie Contemporaine », 1951<sup>64</sup> (1932<sup>1</sup>)

duration, process or progress: a continuously flowing presence to oneself. Explicitly perceived duration and claim of identity is self. Self is consciousness of duration. It may be interrupted by sleep, coma or what not as we all know, but as soon as we wake up, we resume being ourselves without any trouble or difficulty. It seems to be the most natural thing or feeling in the world, when it really is a daily miracle.

Consciousness—the fact that I identify with me and no one else—is a mystery that I trust will always remain unsolved. But its conditions of existence may be compared to the four faces of a pyramid. A three-faced pyramid sitting on a fourth triangle. And I believe that this fourth triangle is in fact the first, the basis of consciousness. It is memory.

## 1 Memory

By memory I mean a living memory, not a dead ‘memory’ or storage place like a book or a library, a museum or a computer disc or key, or even a computer or a robot. A memory that lives and knows that it knows, and by itself retrieves what it needs when it needs it. We can feel this whenever precisely we do not find immediately or automatically but have to search through our souvenirs to find it. Saint Augustine (354–430) discusses this perfectly.<sup>5</sup>

Loss of memory or amnesia indeed threatens self-awareness. As may be seen in some brain diseases like Alzheimer’s. When no memory is left, no consciousness remains. People who after accident lose memory retain their consciousness to the extent of the preservation or reconstruction of memory.

Conscious memory seems to begin to work and thus exist between three and five or six years after birth. It can then assume the subconscious recordings made by all the nervous cells, brain cells in particular. This also is a common experiment. When we wake up, we can become aware of what we were unconsciously dreaming. Or after an anaesthesia, during which our body suffered but not us as we were not conscious, we resume the unconscious suffering and now suffer for good ourselves.

This watching of memory probably suggests to you the link that I see between consciousness and museums. But notice that museums are no bits of memories by themselves. Should mankind disappear tonight, museums no more than books or computerized data like Google or *Wikipedia* would work or exist like memorizing or conscious beings.<sup>6</sup> If mankind ceases to live awake, there can remain no memory or consciousness. Or the other way round. We shall return to this later.

## 2 Feelings

The second face of the four-sided volume that I painted as an image of the self or of consciousness may be equated with the sensations and feelings that we associate with animal life. Life as we have lived it from childhood to the present minute, pain and pleasure, affects and feelings, self-image and intentions, desires and projects, impregnations and personal recognition, love and hatred, art and mysticism, mythology, belief or faith and religion, etc.

The way I see this façade of consciousness may be linked with our person as we see it from inside, our *misérable petit tas de secrets* as André Malraux evoked it in his *Antimémoires* in 1965. This inner perception is largely constructed and determined by reflecting on other humans’ views of us. We would not have become human beings without others. Again this can be observed by wolf or monkey children. If they are raised only by animals, not like Mowgli in the *Jungle Book* by

<sup>5</sup> *Confessions*, 398.

<sup>6</sup> Elephants are credited with an excellent memory. Memory is a condition of consciousness. But it is not consciousness.

Rudyard Kipling but like Victor de l'Aveyron according to Dr. Itard,<sup>7</sup> they do not become humans.

Personality seems to be driven by affects and intentions. If these are human affects and projects, we too become human beings. I believe it can be observed in personal *ontogenesis* everyday. Probably it may be partly extended for the species in *anthropogenesis*. In societies, it might be linked, perhaps equated, with culture or civilization. Another hint to museums. Provided that this final point in turn is related with what I see as our third facet.

### 3 Reason

The third surface of the four-sided volume that I see as the skin of our self or consciousness is expressed by speech, language, logic, mathematics, science and all their fast growing developments today. My book *Le Parleur* elaborates on this. I believe it to be crucial. Without language there could be no consciousness. And there cannot be consciousness without some sort of language. Of course this has nothing to do with spoken or oral language. Deaf and deaf and blind people can become full human beings through their own sign or sign-and-touch languages, like Helen Keller (1880-1968). Provided that they are taken care of and educated like human beings, as again is clearly and movingly exemplified in Helen Keller's case.<sup>8</sup> Helen was a normal child but when she was 19 months she got a disease that left her deaf and blind. Her loving parents could no longer communicate with her in any way except in hugging her affectionately. But she regressed mentally and obviously stopped talking as she could not hear her own voice as well as that of family. Only when she was seven did a new young nurse, Ann Sullivan, 19, come to the household. Miss Sullivan forced into her pupil's imprisoned mind the association between a thing she had always kept loving, water, with the sign and eventually the letters *w,a,t,e,r* that she pressed into the child's palm refreshed by the water of a fountain.<sup>9</sup> From that moment on, in a few years only did Helen acquire—through hand contact exclusively!—English, then Latin, Greek, French and German. Helen Keller remained deaf and blind all her life. But she travelled through the globe as a witness of the human miracle of speech. One does not speak through one's mouth but rather by one's ears. But above all we do not speak with our mouths and ears, nor with our eyes and gestures or our hand contacts but with our brains. It is the human brain that communicates. With other human brains, provided it has been trained to do so, preferably from birth. Human minds are resilient. They can still become human minds when they are exposed to loving human beings during childhood. But then mental retardation or unbalance may be feared. Human education must start as early as possible. Also a hint for us museologists.

Just one last word on this third aspect of the self. Arithmetic, geometry, algebra, calculus in all its forms with or without material or written support, with schemes and plans, maps and industrial drawings or computer chip labyrinths, and derived expanses thereof like rational knowledge, including all sciences and techniques, are developments of language. It can be shown through the double articulation of all languages, including the sign languages of the deaf and of the deaf and blind. But it does not concern us here.

<sup>7</sup> ITARD, Jean-Marc, *Victor de l'Aveyron*, précédé de *Le Docteur Itard entre l'énigme et l'échec* par François DAGOGNET, Paris, Éditions Allia, 1994 ; CHAPPEY, Jean-Luc, 2002, *La Société des Observateurs de l'homme (1799-1804), des anthropologues au temps de Bonaparte*, Paris, Société des études robespierristes, 2002 ; GINESTE Th., *Victor de l'Aveyron, dernier enfant sauvage, premier enfant fou*, Paris, Hachette, 1981 ; STRIVAY, Lucienne, *Enfants sauvages : approches anthropologiques*, Paris : Gallimard, « Bibliothèque des sciences humaines », 2006

<sup>8</sup> KELLER, Helen A., *Sourde, muette, aveugle. Histoire de ma vie*, Paris : Payot, 1991 [1904<sup>1</sup> by Helen Keller], traduit de l'anglais par A. HUZARD

<sup>9</sup> If we follow what is told by Helen KELLER herself in her book. According to other sources, Ann Sullivan was so furious at the child's "stubbornness" not to understand language that she dropped a bucket of water over her head—and then imprinted the corresponding sign into her hand.

## 4 Freedom

The fourth and final membrane between the self and the rest of the universe, including our own mind and body, is imagination and therefore freedom, freewill, will or decision making capacity, as Henri Bergson demonstrated in 1888 with his thesis *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*.

In theory it is possible for a human being to consider that he is not free as he is and must be, like all other things including superior animals, determined by his genes, ultimately by his molecules, his atoms...

In fact it is impossible for any human being to behave and even think as if he were a mere robot. Of course we are conditioned to a colossal extent, clearly much more than 99,9%. But it is the remaining bit that makes us humans that only explains why we try to convince others, or ourselves, to think, or say, or do, this and that rather than shut up. We always act as if we and our human adult brethren were free to choose, except small children, drunken or mad people. Justice takes it into account, precisely distinguishing between those who can be held responsible and those who cannot, as if they were comatose, animal or plant like. Yet again this is beyond our scope today.

### **From bio- to noosphere, from Darwinian to Lamarckian Evolution**

As long as we are animals, natural or Darwinian selection accounts for blind Evolution. No acquired knowledge is transmitted to our descent. This is *biosphere*, the ‘sphere of life’. It has guided evolution of life on our planet for four billion years, including that of monkeys. It began to diverge with our conscious ape-like ancestors between one to three million years ago presumably. Language and all its expansions dramatically increased the quality and quantity of transmission of knowledge and spectacularly speeded up progress. Cannot this be watched today forcibly? Through language and its expansions, including museums and schools, transmission of acquired characteristics renders human evolution or progress Lamarckian. This is *noosphere*,<sup>10</sup> the ‘sphere of the mind’. It belongs to the spirit and is in this sense immaterial or unnatural or supernatural. But for a bit over ten thousand years now and the Neolithic revolution, the material surface of the planet too has been changed. For the better or for the worse, as can also be shown with roads, cities, industries, lighting networks, pollution and nuclear damage. Mind has added a palpable layer to the Earth. Speaking, writing, printing, typing and now computing multiplies our ability to store, forward and archive ever-faster-expanding knowledge.

And this is where we find museums. We want to know who we are. How we are who we are. How we became who we are, and how others are and became who they are. This is social or collective psychology. Whatever the subject of the museum or the sanctuary of any product of mind, including zoos and natural reserves, it always belongs to the noosphere as this is defined as human knowledge, classification, explanation and “artificial” expansion of the natural world. Whatever the topic and paraphernalia, the real object of the show is always the human mind: *a tiger in a museum is not a tiger but a museum tiger* (Kenneth Hudson, 1916-1999).

We may conjecture that the first parents of our museums were tribal rituals and perhaps objects. As soon as they become less tools and more memory or identity emblems, that is when they become significant more than useful, they become more human or mind expansions than body expansions like stones to fight, grind nuts and grain or tear apart pieces of meat, bone or skin. Possibly at the same time must have appeared personal or family jewels. As soon as they are transmitted or kept for their emotional value we can start envisaging the project of museums. Or temples of objects meaningful to us. Patriotic or religious monuments must have had a similar sense: social identity and cohesion through the same meaning attached to signs, rituals or things. Stolen or conquered weapons, ‘flags’ or other symbols, with trophies, heads of ancestors and enemies, together with skulls, skeletons and skins of large animals, must also have played a

<sup>10</sup> The term was coined by French palaeontologist Pierre TEILHARD DE CHARDIN in *Le Phénomène humain* (1922). Above and around *geosphere* and *biosphere* there is now on this planet a *noosphere* or layer of mind. It may evoke the various sediments of the human brain, reptilian at its root, then mammal and primate, and finally ‘prefrontal’, human.

comparable role. They are worth nothing and serve no practical purpose but are our treasure as well as our shared memory. And we teach their relevance to our offspring.

This becomes paramount in Classical Antiquity, where emperors, states and very wealthy owners gather meaningful trophies from as many places as they can. Prestige and sense is attached to them, one by one and by their collective ‘collection’.

In some religions relics play the role of highly significant objects, to the point where they may appear magic—which indeed is opposite to any notion of archive or museum. But to magnify and protect them shrines are built that remind of the same purpose : explain the meaning and show the importance.

During European Renaissance our modern concept of museum appears, with systematic collections. With the invention of printing the ancient reality of libraries that belonged partly to the same ideal increases tremendously and at the same time becomes more affordably shared by greater portions of the community. Selected models become ‘classic’ or *classical* are they are referred to in society and in education.

Finally, under the auspices of the ‘Muses’ of Ancient times appear museums as we have known them since childhood. They seem to be at a new turning point today. As their educational value and strength is emphasized more than their treasure or prestige aspect. Although this double notion similarly grows for economical and tourist reasons. States and cities want to possess rare pieces to attract visitors and investors.

However, this movement is counterattacked by *Le Musée imaginaire*, according to André Malraux’s formula in his 1947 essay. Notice that this is also where the French war hero, novelist and art historian, without knowing Kenneth Hudson, says: *Due to the modern Western perspective, in museums crucifixes are not crucifixes anymore but ‘metamorphosed’ images that may be compared and studied amongst other images.* Thanks to photography, cinema and recordings of all sorts, it is no longer necessary to go anywhere to see or hear masterpieces or daily objects from all over the world. Their function has changed. They now belong to a potentially universal world of meanings fleeing away from material reality or possession.

Again, Internet, Google etc. render anything instantly accessible to all. But transformed by the medium: *The Medium Is the Message* as H. Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) caricatured.

## So, what do we do now?

Availability is no longer the problem for collections. Oddly enough, it is almost the contrary. If we want our heirs not to be zombies wandering purposelessly through meaningless hopefully pleasant gardens and cities, we must communicate to them the appetite for the ‘carrot’ that has made the donkey or mankind move or progress thus far.

Information, beauty and meaning are henceforth available everywhere for free. But what if no one is interested? Mankind stops. Man regresses to animal in the sense that if we behave, talk and think like robots caring only for bodily pleasure, safety and comfort, the faces 2 and 4 of our minds will crumble down. Projects and imagination, hence freedom, will recess. Some suspect they get atrophied right now as they see a lack of ideal and purpose in the daily lives of many youngsters. I do not think so.

For one thing, I trust that the majority of mankind has always and legitimately searched essentially for safety, comfort and pleasure (with glory and wealth), and that there is nothing wrong or new in that—except in the fact that many now confess it flatly.

I once heard a distinguished middle-aged lady claim : *man is driven by sex and food only.* She was visiting an exhibition on Women in Science. What did that have to do with sex and food? She was driven by other forces, including perhaps prestige and boredom but perhaps consciousness if not conscience as well. Even when he believes so, man is no tiger...

And secondly I agree with the contemporary French philosopher Luc Ferry when he observes that today most of us would give their lives for their kin, for their children in particular. Not because of any feeling of tribe or clan, or *honour* or *duty*, but simply out of family affection

and sense of responsibility. This is human consciousness at its best. When it becomes concrete and efficient in conscience. If this is new, and I trust that it is to a reasonable extent, it is a reason to rejoice and be confident in the future.

What I think is true for the future is that it crucially depends on education.

We have to stimulate curiosity.

We have to frame puzzled minds.

The information given by television and computers, by portable telephones and pointless *chats* or gossip of all kinds with any trendy ignorant, including American series and stupid computer games will not drive us far. And may possibly conduct to meaninglessness and despair.

Museums have a role if they succeed in attracting youngsters—as indeed many already do, in Scandinavia, Britain and Germany amongst others!

The first responsibility for this rests on the parents and on the family, as always, but more and more so now, I think. Then of course peer groups, schools and educational associations, scouts and guides, sport teams, choirs and clubs, etc. will play an always greater role. Not to mention reading and television—that is a bit discomfoting today, I must admit, but much less in Europe than anywhere else in the world. Last week, I felt flabbergasted at the brutality and idiocy of Indian television programmes. They are watched by more than any others on the globe.

As for museums, we must try and invent a way to become the living memory of mankind. The way I see it, they must become founding and structuring centres that would—together with schools and all other educational and leisure expansions of course—the equivalent for society of memory in each individual consciousness. Memory in the sense that I suggested initially. As the foundation of self, identity, and humankind. *Edutainment* is a fine idea. You will reach no one if you are a bore. You will not conduct anyone anyplace if do not know where to go.

... Any specific recommendation derived from these high flying considerations? To a large extent, they are already put to work today. Facet 3 of our volume, labelled *reason*, has traditionally been more exploited than facets 2, *feelings* or *affects*, and 4, *freedom* or *imagination*. After Henri Bergson again, *reason* or *analytical intelligence*, linked with *vision*, is often associated with *male*, *space* and *measure*; *feelings* and *imagination* or *synthetic intelligence*, linked with *hearing*, *touch*, *smell* and *taste*, with *female*, *children*, *time* and *intuition*. These two theoretical extremes of mankind are currently rebalanced in museums today in favour of femininity. That sounds good to my ears.

Hurray for museums!

*Laboratoire de phonétique, Service de Linguistique expérimentale, Université de Liège*