

**The Curse of the Self:
Self-Awareness, Egotism,
and the Quality of
Human Life**

Mark R. Leary

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

THE CURSE OF THE SELF ❖

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PREFACE ❖

As a university professor, I regularly attend my university's graduation exercises each spring. As I've sat through my share of both excellent and dreadful commencement speeches, I have sometimes mused over what *I* would say to the graduating students and assembled guests if I were ever invited to give a graduation address. What important lesson could I impart in 15 minutes or less that, if heeded, might change the graduates' lives as they made their way out into the world?

A few years ago, as I listened to a speaker talk about the challenges that the graduates would face, I decided that my commencement speech would tell students that their greatest challenges in life would be ones that they inadvertently created for themselves. "You will face various disappointments, problems, and even tragedies in life," I would say, "many of which you will have little or no power to control. But the primary cause of your unhappiness will be you."

This claim is not new, of course. Others have suggested that people are often their own worst enemies. But others who have examined this topic rarely consider the possibility that people create so much unhappiness for themselves because of how the human mind is designed. As a social psychologist with interests in self and identity, I have come to the conclusion that the natural human tendencies to be egocentric, egotistical, and otherwise egoistic play a central role in our problems at both the personal and societal levels.

Although a few other animals can think consciously about themselves in rather basic ways, no other species possesses the powers of self-reflection that human beings have. The ability to self-reflect offers many

benefits by allowing us to plan ahead, reminisce about the past, consider options, innovate, and evaluate ourselves. However, self-awareness also sets us up for a host of problems that are unlike the difficulties faced by any other species. Among other things, the capacity for self-reflection distorts people's perceptions of the world, leading them to draw inaccurate conclusions about themselves and other people, and prompting them to make bad decisions based on faulty information. Self-awareness conjures up a great deal of personal suffering in the form of depression, anxiety, anger, and other negative emotions by allowing people to ruminate about the past or imagine what might befall them in the future. The inherently egocentric and egotistical manner in which the self processes information can blind people to their own shortcomings and undermine their relationships with others. The self also underlies a great deal of social conflict, leading people to dislike those who are different from them and to fight with members of other social groups. It also leads people to endanger their own well-being by putting egoistic goals over personal safety. For those inclined toward religion and spirituality, visionaries have proclaimed that the self stymies the quest for spiritual fulfillment and leads to immoral behavior. And, ironically, using self-reflection to help us deliberately control our own behavior can often backfire and create more problems than it solves.

The Curse of the Self is about the personal and social problems that result from self-reflection, egocentrism, and egotism. I wrote it for readers who want to understand why they—like all other people—have such difficulty finding the peaceful, happy, and satisfying life they desire. I suspect that many of them already have a vague sense that at least part of the reason lies in an excessively self-focused and egoistic approach to life. This book will explain how and why our natural tendency to talk to ourselves, see the world egocentrically, defend our egos, seek self-validation, and engage in other acts of selfhood often works against our best interests.

I also wrote the book to counteract what I view as the glorification of egoism in Western culture and pop psychology. People are often urged to solve their problems and improve their lives by focusing on themselves, setting more egoistic goals, enhancing their self-esteem, and otherwise strengthening their sense of self. Although these strategies are sometimes useful, those who promote an egoistic approach to solving life's problems fail to recognize that an excessive emphasis on self and ego is often part of the problem.

Although I wrote this book primarily for nonprofessionals, I believe that behavioral scientists, mental health professionals, and students in psychology and related disciplines will find the material useful and provocative. For them, I have included references to the scholarly literature on which my claims are based.

I would like to thank my students and colleagues, many of whom have contributed to my thinking about the self. I particularly appreciate the feedback that Geoff MacDonald and Robin Kowalski provided on early drafts of certain chapters. I also thank Connie Kuhlman, Roger Charles, Carolyn Crump, John Bloss, and Alexa Moderno for many provocative discussions regarding ways in which the self is a curse. Finally, I wish to acknowledge assistance from an R. J. Reynolds Research Leave from Wake Forest University, which allowed me to write portions of the book.

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THE CURSE OF THE SELF ❖

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The Self-Aware Animal

Self-awareness . . . is an evolutionary novelty; the biological species from which mankind has descended had only rudiments of self-awareness, or perhaps lacked it altogether.

— T. DOBZHANSKY

When 24-year-old John Scopes decided to challenge Tennessee's new law prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools, he could not have anticipated that he would be cast into the national spotlight during the hot, dry summer of 1925. On the surface, the matter seemed one of only local interest. Scopes, a high school science teacher, was accused of violating the Butler Act, which made it unlawful to teach "any theory that denies the story of the divine creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man descended from a lower order of animals." Yet the nation quickly became entranced with the dramatic courtroom performances of noted attorneys William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow as they challenged one another and the court on issues that ran much deeper than a schoolteacher's run-in with the law—the conflict between science and religion, the separation of church and state, the infallibility of the Bible, and a teacher's right to academic freedom.

One issue at the center of the court proceedings was the question of how human beings differ from other animals. The prosecution strenuously objected to Darwin's view that human beings are a species of animal that evolved according to the same biological processes as all other animals. Pointing to the offending textbook that Scopes used in his course, William Jennings Bryan bellowed, "There is the book they were teaching your children that man was a mammal, and so indistinguishable among the mammals that they leave him there with 3,499 other mammals!"¹

Bryan was not alone in his refusal to believe that human beings are animals. Human beings differ from other animals in so many striking

ways that, even today, many people have difficulty thinking of us as having been cut from the same cloth. Yet those who try to distinguish human beings from animals disagree regarding precisely what it is that makes us so different. Like Bryan, many theologians and philosophers have asserted that only human beings have a soul or were specially created “in God’s image,” as the Bible asserts. The philosopher René Descartes promoted this view, arguing that whereas human beings possess a soul, animals are merely machines. However, many people disagree that possession of a soul distinguishes humans from other animals, either because they are unwilling to concede that other animals do not have a soul or that human beings do.

For many years, some scientists maintained that human beings are unique in their ability to make and use tools. However, this distinction collapsed when close inspection revealed that other species as diverse as beavers, chimpanzees, sea otters, and elephants also use tools. Human tools may be superior to theirs in some sense, but we cannot claim that tool use itself distinguishes human beings from other animals.

Others have suggested that we differ from other creatures in our ability to communicate through language. Certainly, human beings are facile with spoken and written language in ways that other species are not. Yet other animals do communicate quite effectively with each other through chirps, grunts, growls, and nonverbal behaviors. We may have a more sophisticated and flexible ability to communicate than do other animals, but it’s largely a matter of degree.

Another possible difference is that people are simply more intelligent than other animals. *Civic Biology*, the textbook that landed John Scopes in court, took this view, noting that “we know that man is separated mentally by a wide gap from all other mammals.”² But again, this is a matter of degree. People do solve novel problems and reason more effectively than most other animals, but we also must admit that every animal has domains of “intelligence” that people don’t possess. And, despite our seemingly superior intellect, human beings do an untold number of very unintelligent things that pose serious threats to themselves and to the world at large, things that seem far more stupid than we observe in any other animal.

Without disputing that people differ from at least some other animals in all of these ways, I believe that the defining difference between human beings and other animals involves the nature of the human self. As we will see, evidence strongly suggests that most other animals do not

have a self at all and that those species that do possess a self have only a very rudimentary one compared with human beings.³

People use the word *self* in several distinct ways, so let me make my use clear. As I am using the term, *self* refers to the mental apparatus that allows people (and a few other species of animals) to think consciously about themselves.⁴ Of course, all animals can “think” in the sense that they process information about themselves and their environments, but few are able to think consciously about themselves or about what they are doing. Only animals with a self—those with the cognitive ability to focus their attention on and think consciously about themselves—can think deliberately about themselves, form images of what they are like (a self-concept), evaluate themselves (and react emotionally to their self-evaluations), talk to themselves in their own minds, and purposefully control their own behavior with some conscious goal in mind. Clearly, other species of animals get by just fine without having a self. Yet having this capacity for self-reflection opens up an entirely new world of experiences, opportunities, and challenges for animals that have one, including human beings.

❖ What Difference Does a Self Make?

You are so accustomed to thinking about yourself that you may have never considered what an unusual ability this is or what life would be like if you couldn’t do it. How would you be different if you were unable to focus on or think about yourself? Being able to think about oneself has five important consequences that not only account for most important behavioral differences between human beings and other animals but also create a wide array of personal and social problems that are the focus of this book. The ability to self-reflect is an essential feature of the human psyche, yet it is also a curse.

Planning

Perhaps the most important consequence of having a self is the ability to plan. All planning requires the ability to think about oneself so that one can play out various future events and imagine the consequences of one’s actions. Having a self allows people to create what Julian Jaynes called the *analogue-I*.⁵ The analogue-I is a mental representation or imagi-

nary stand-in for the person—a thought or image of oneself that people can think about, manipulate, or move around in their mind. Sometimes people imagine seeing themselves in a particular situation, as if they were watching a hazy movie of what might happen. More commonly, the analogue-I is a person's imagined perspective on a scene as viewed from his or her own viewpoint. Using your analogue-I, you can imagine yourself in other situations, intentionally plan to do something in the future, consider your options, mentally rehearse future actions, retrospectively imagine how events might have turned out differently, and even contemplate your own death.

All planning requires the individual to imagine him- or herself at some time in the future. By manipulating a thought or image of oneself mentally, a person can think about what needs to be done now to achieve a particular goal in the future. Animals without a self cannot do this sort of mental time-travel. As a result, most other animals do not plan at all but, rather, respond to the environment on a moment-by-moment basis. Of course, some animals do things that appear to be in preparation for some future event. For example, squirrels hoard nuts as winter approaches, and pregnant animals often build nests for their unborn young. But it seems unlikely that these kinds of behaviors involve the same sort of deliberate planning that is involved when people buy food for the upcoming picnic or when expectant parents buy a crib before the baby is born. Animals are programmed to carry out particular patterns of behavior in response to certain environmental and internal stimuli (such as hormones), but without a self, they cannot really plan more than a few seconds ahead. Their responses reflect patterns of behavior that are elicited by internal or external stimuli rather than deliberate decisions based on conscious self-focused thought.

Decision Making and Self-Control

A self also allows people to make deliberate decisions to control their own behavior. With the ability to imagine what may happen in the future, people can make decisions to avoid problems or take advantage of opportunities, often well in advance of the time when those decisions can actually be implemented. Self-less animals do not have that option; they cannot “decide” to behave differently than they naturally do. The fact that our decisions are sometimes conscious and deliberate does not necessarily mean that they are better than those made automatically, but the process is different.

In every conscious decision, the individual tries to imagine the likely consequences of different possible lines of action. Think about trying to decide which of two job offers to accept. The cognitive task involves imagining the consequences of each decision—projecting oneself not only into the future but also into places and circumstances in which one has not been before. Being able to imagine themselves in the future allows people to play out the possible consequences of various actions, creating mental simulations of possible future outcomes.

Not all behavior is based on deliberate decisions. Often, people react automatically without consciously thinking about what they are doing. People possess two distinct mental systems by which they process information and make decisions: one is conscious and controlled, and involves deliberately thinking about what we are doing, while the other is nonconscious and automatic, and does not involve conscious thought. We move back and forth between these modes frequently, rapidly, and usually without effort.⁶

The nonconscious, automatic system, which is shared by all mammals (and perhaps all animals), starts on its own, operates very quickly, and runs automatically, without any intentional effort on the part of the individual. Automatic processes require little, if any conscious attention, and the processes themselves operate outside of the person's awareness.⁷ In contrast, the conscious, controlled system appears to be unique to human beings after the age of about two years and perhaps a few species of nonhuman primates. The conscious system is involved in mental acts of which we are aware, that we intend, and that we can control with effort. Controlled processes begin intentionally and operate rather slowly as the individual thinks through options and makes deliberate decisions. Furthermore, the process itself is open to awareness so that the person is cognizant of the steps involved in consciously analyzing a problem, formulating a solution, or making a decision.

John Bargh, a leading researcher of nonconscious processes, maintains that most human behavior is controlled by automatic processes.⁸ Right now, you are not consciously aware of reading the letters in each of these words (until I mention them, that is), nor of how it is that you are reading them or extracting their meaning. You are not conscious of the position of your body (again, until I mention it), despite the fact that you automatically reposition parts of it from time to time. You are not aware that you are occasionally blinking your eyes, or conscious of the fact that you are breathing. Assuming that you are reasonably engrossed in reading this paragraph, you are aware only of its meaning, which you are au-

tomatically decoding, and everything else lies outside your awareness. And, if you are not engrossed in this paragraph, you are not even aware of what you just read even though your eyes have nonetheless scanned the sentence!

From Bargh's perspective, it is fortunate that most of our behavior occurs automatically because people simply do not have enough cognitive resources to think consciously about everything that they do. Just as automatic devices such as answering machines and thermostats free people from having to respond actively to answer an incoming call or turn on the heat, automatic mental processes free us from having to think about tasks for which conscious thought is not needed. It would be impossible for us to deal with all of life's decisions in a conscious, self-aware, controlled fashion because we have only a limited amount of attentional capacity. Fortunately, most of our daily decisions, emotional reactions, and behaviors are the product of automatic processes rather than conscious choice.

One important difference between automatic and controlled processes involves the fact that controlled processes require a self, whereas automatic processes do not (although, as we will see, automatic processes sometimes involve self-reflection). To make deliberate decisions or control their natural reactions, people must be able to think consciously about themselves and the implications of their behavior. In fact, it is possible that the self's main function is to provide a way for people to override their automatic inclinations. Instead of responding nonconsciously and automatically as other animals typically do, people have the option, at least in principle, of restraining their automatic reactions or substituting behaviors of their choosing for those that occur naturally. So, no matter how much you might like to eat three pieces of cake or to hit someone who has infuriated you, the self allows the possibility of consciously exercising control over these urges.

Of course, self-control is by no means perfect, and sometimes our automatic reactions are too strong to be controlled by volition.⁹ So, we all experience instances in which we have trouble making ourselves behave as we would like. Despite our best intentions, we gobble up the three pieces of cake or strike out at the other person. An intriguing question is why the self is not always powerful enough to override our urges, and what happens psychologically to make us "lose self-control." We'll address this question in chapter 8. For now, the important point is that possession of a self and the capacity for self-reflection allows at least the possibility of deciding to control one's actions.

Self-Conceptualization and Evaluation

An animal with a self can create a mental representation of itself, allowing it to think about its own characteristics and behaviors. This representation may be visual (I can “see” myself in my mind) or verbal (I can label, define, or characterize myself).

Behavioral researchers have been interested in how people conceptualize themselves because, once formed, people’s self-concepts provide an important source of input to their decisions.¹⁰ Our behavior is often affected by our beliefs about the kind of person we are—what characteristics and abilities we possess, for example. We sometimes do certain things because we see ourselves as the kind of person who does that sort of thing, and we resist doing other things because we’re “not that kind of person.” We undertake certain tasks because we believe that we have the ability to do them well, and we avoid other tasks because we think ourselves incompetent. Because an animal without a self does not have a self-concept, its behavior is not influenced by its beliefs about its personal characteristics.

Having a self also allows people to evaluate themselves. Although all animals can assess whether their ongoing behavior is accomplishing immediate goals, only animals with a self can step back and evaluate themselves and their behavior according to abstract standards, then react to those self-evaluations. For example, you are able to think abstractly about whether you are a “good” employee, student, friend, lover, athlete, musician, or person-in-general in ways that other animals cannot. When these self-evaluations are favorable, you experience positive feelings; when they are negative, you feel badly. Again, these self-evaluative reactions are possible only because you can think consciously about yourself.

Combining the ability to think about the future with the ability to self-evaluate gives human beings the potential to change themselves. Most people devote a good deal of effort to controlling and changing their behavior as they try to lose weight, stop smoking, control their temper, procrastinate less, or control other bad habits or vices. Deliberate self-change necessarily requires a self.¹¹ An animal that can think about itself and imagine the likely future consequences of its behavior is no longer a slave to environmental factors and automatic mental processes. Of course, simply having the ability to think about the future and to self-evaluate does not guarantee that people can always control their actions. If it did, we would always be able to make ourselves behave exactly as

we desired. But even though our ability to control ourselves is imperfect, self-control would be impossible without the ability to reflect upon and evaluate ourselves.

An animal without a self cannot simply decide to behave contrary to its natural inclinations. A goose could not decide in a conscious and deliberate fashion to fly north rather than south for the winter, and a stallion could not decide to pass up the opportunity to mate with a sexually receptive mare. You, on the other hand, can truly decide whether to go north or south on vacation and whether or not to respond to another person's sexual advances. This is not to say that animals that lack a self never do things that are atypical for their species; they do. But such behaviors are the result of idiosyncratic patterns of physiology, experience, and environment, and not a self-directed decision.

Introspection

Although an animal without a self thinks, feels, and behaves, it cannot think about thinking, feeling, and behaving. In contrast, human beings can contemplate their own thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Not only are we alive, but we also know we are alive. We are not only having a good time, but we can also think about what a good time we are having. We are not only in pain, but we can also wish the pain would go away. We not only see the tree, but we can also think about how pretty the tree is. We are not only sexually aroused, but we can also think consciously about the object of our arousal and our reactions to him or her. We not only think but we can also think about our thoughts.

Possessing a self adds a layer of interpretation to the direct perception of the world and our experiences in it. Rather than simply perceiving the world and reacting to it, we can introspect about what we perceive and experience. As we will explore in chapter 2, introspection changes the nature of our experiences from what they would have been had we not thought consciously about them. For example, when we think carefully about things in life—such as products we buy, gifts we receive, courses we take, and even romantic partners with whom we are involved—the process of conscious thinking can change how we feel about these things. Paradoxically, thinking too much about life can interfere with our ability to process information about it accurately, and retrospectively examining decisions we have made may lower our satisfaction with them.¹² Contrary to what most people assume, it is sometimes better to think too little rather than too much.

Perspective-Taking

Nicholas Humphrey proposed that, once the emergence of self-awareness during evolutionary history provided human beings with the ability to think about their own behavior and inner mental lives, they could begin to infer things about the behavior and mental lives of others.¹³ Essentially, they could imagine in their own minds what it might be like to be somebody else, based on their understanding of themselves. Thus, the ability to think about oneself goes hand-in-hand with the ability to imagine the world from other people's perspectives, including the ability to imagine how one is perceived and evaluated by others.

Evidence for this conclusion comes from two sources. First, animals without a self show little or no evidence that they can take other organisms' perspectives. For example, they do not realize that another organism has a different visual perspective on a scene than they do, and they do not seem to ponder how they are being viewed by another. However, the few animals that show evidence of having at least a rudimentary capacity for self-awareness also seem to be capable of taking others' perspectives.¹⁴ In his book *Chimpanzee Politics*, primatologist Frans de Waal showed that chimpanzees, one of the few other species known to have the ability to self-reflect, are able to deceive one another deliberately, an action that requires imagining the perspective of another individual.¹⁵ Likewise, Jane Goodall and others have reported instances in which chimpanzees appeared intentionally to suppress their normal reactions (such as studiously ignoring a piece of food that only they could see when another chimp was watching) in order to mislead another chimp.¹⁶

On the surface, many animals act as if they can infer the inner thoughts or emotions of other animals. For example, a low-ranking wolf may display submissive, appeasement behaviors in response to the angry stare of a high-ranking one. But such reactions are automatic responses to the other wolf's expressions and postures rather than the result of inferring that the high-ranking wolf is angry or has malevolent intentions. Only human beings and a few other primates appear to be able to put themselves in the minds of others.

A second piece of evidence about the link between self-awareness and perspective-taking comes from research in developmental psychology. Children develop the ability to take other people's perspectives at about the same time as they develop the ability to think about themselves. Prior to 18 to 24 months of age (the age differs across infants), babies lack the capacity for self-awareness. Not only can they not think consciously

about themselves, but also they are unable to infer the mental states of others. After they begin to display evidence of self-awareness, babies also begin to demonstrate empathy, altruistic behavior, self-consciousness, and other reactions that require the ability to adopt the perspectives of other people.¹⁷

It is easy to see that these features of the self offer human beings many benefits. Being able to plan, self-evaluate, control one's own responses, introspect, and adopt other people's perspectives not only help people navigate life more successfully but also are responsible for most of the cultural innovations that we think of as human "progress." Science, philosophy, government, education, and health care would all be impossible if people could not consciously self-reflect. Perhaps you now understand why I think that having a self is the most important difference between human beings and most other animals.

❖ The Search for the Self

If you are like most people, you may have the vague sense that there is, inside your head, a small, experiencing "thing" that registers your experiences, thinks your thoughts, and feels your feelings—some sort of conscious entity "in there" that is the center of your awareness, thought, and conscious experience. Many people report that this mental presence is at the core of whom they really or most essentially are, and some people have the sense that their body is just a vehicle for carrying around this important mental entity. For some people, the constant presence of this sense of self is what convinces them that they are the same person today as they were many years ago. Despite all of the changes that they have experienced, this inner self has remained constant. Some say that they could lose virtually everything else—their possessions, their family, their identity, even most of their body—and they would still be essentially the same person; only if they lost this mental presence would they be truly and completely gone. In fact, when many people think about dying, it is this mental consciousness that they imagine being extinguished at the time of death.¹⁸

When asked where their sense of self is located, most people reply that it is in their head. When researchers ask people to indicate where "you" are located by adjusting a pointing device, people usually locate their "egocenter" at a position between but slightly behind their eyes, somewhere along the median plane of the head from front to back.¹⁹ Of

course, there is not really any sort of identifiable structure such as this inside our skulls. We each have a brain, and the human brain has the ability to think about the person who carries the brain around. However, most people do not localize their egocenter as being the size and location of their physical brain but, rather, as something smaller.

The sensation one gets from close introspection is that there is a small inner space behind the eyes in which our conscious thoughts occur. If you close your eyes and introspect—for example, think about standing at the checkout in your local supermarket—you will likely get the sense that the scene, as hazy as it might be, is being played out in this inner space. You can even look in different directions—at your groceries, at the clerk, at the tabloids beside the counter. If you wish, you can even move through this space—for example by leaving the checkout line to retrieve a forgotten item from the shelves.

We are all accustomed to engaging in this sort of self-thought, but we rarely stop to think about what it means to “look” at a scene such as this. Where is the “space” in which this image is occurring, and who or what is looking at it? Most people are stymied by this question and feel vaguely uneasy even trying to understand what it is that they are experiencing when they imagine themselves in their own minds.

We all know, of course, that there is no empty space—neither a true egocenter nor a theater of the mind—inside our heads where the self does its work. Instead, our heads are filled with brain tissue of various sorts—mostly neurons and supporting tissue, permeated by a circulatory system. But if our craniums are full of biological matter, where does this perception of inner space come from? Given that it is not really there, we clearly must invent this space in our minds and then use it to think about and visualize ourselves, all the time knowing that it doesn’t really exist anatomically.²⁰ How this happens is not understood, but it lies at the heart of people’s sense that they have a self.

People not only think about themselves by imagining the analogue-I, but they also “talk” to themselves in their minds. Inner speech plays an important role in human behavior because it allows us to evaluate, direct, and control our own actions. People internally compliment and criticize themselves (“Boy, I’m getting fat”), offer themselves advice (“Whoa, slow down; the road’s slick”), reassure themselves (“Just relax; it’ll be just fine”), comment on their experiences and feelings (“Geez, I’m tired”), and talk to themselves in myriad other ways. Inner speech can be quite beneficial but, as we will see, it can also create a great deal of unhappiness, conflict, and other personal havoc.