

The Origins of Self-Reflective Consciousness

Professor Janet Metcalfe

212-854-7971

Metcalfe@psych.columbia.edu

The broad questions addressed in this seminar are what constitutes the cognitive underpinnings of the highest order of consciousness, namely, self-reflective consciousness, and how did this kind of consciousness come into being? One answer is that self-reflection consists of a high level brain region or function, which can inspect, comment upon, and change a lower level cognitive brain system. In what, such a coordinated grouping consists, and how it came about are the focus of this seminar. Since this definition corresponds to classic definitions of metacognition, we will first investigate the basic findings in human metacognition. We will then branch out to investigate researchers views of other self-reflective cognitive functions, such as episodic memory, and the projectable self. We will touch on philosophical viewpoints on this issue, and spend several weeks scrutinizing the animal and the developmental literature for precursors to full blown reflective consciousness.

Week

- 1 First meeting
- 2 Episodic memory and auto-noetic consciousness... memory for the future
- 3 Human metacognition and the projectable self Metcalfe/Kober T&M
- 4 Philosophical views, esp. Suddendorf & Corballis, Humphrey, Kinsbourne, Dennett, Goldberg, etc. Kinsbourne is in T&M
- 5 Developmental stories, Katherine Nelson, and Wellman-
- 6 Evolutionary stories
- 7 Agency and metacognition of agency
- 8 Free will

- 9 Imitation
- 10 Theory of mind
- 11 Autism
- 12 The first symbols, cave art and archaic people, and what they mean for consciousness.
- 13 The social origins of the self and consciousness
- 14 Gene, meme and the self. Robot's Rebellion (Stanovich)

Evaluation: There will be two presentations per person, each worth 25%, a 10 page term paper due on the last day of class, worth 25%, and there will be 25% for participation.

Readings: Many of the papers we'll discuss can be found in the Missing Link in Cognition, OUP, edited by Terrace & Metcalfe (available at Labyrinth, but we can also post it on courseworks). There will also be specialized readings, which will be given weekly under the supervision of the person responsible for that week. It is up to you to consult with Dr. Metcalfe and Bridgid Finn about the readings well in advance. some topics may be served by your reading a book or two, so don't let it slip until the last minute. Also, if you would like to put your presentations up on a powerpoint (make use you come to the lab in advance, to check that the computer and projector are working smoothly with your powerpoint). There are many wonderful books coming out on this topic, and Science and Nature seem to be preoccupied with the topic, so please keep the class informed if you come upon new offerings.