

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

THE ORIGINS OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AS A SOCIAL
PHENOMENON:
THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN
CONSCIOUSNESS
BY THE END OF THE CLASSICAL PERIOD IN GREECE

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SECTION I: Self-Identity and the Development of Consciousness

If the more or less three-and-one-half billion years of the evolution of living things, as simple as algae and bacteria, is symbolized by one hour of time, then **primate evolution** took one-minute, and **human evolution** occurred in the last four-seconds of that hour.¹ More astonishing still, is that our particular species, homo sapiens, has entered on that one-hour stage, in only the very last second, of this hour-long saga which we might call "The History of Living Things"; that history documents a story unfolding for some three and one-half billion years. **Something** had begun to come together, and **interconnect** in such a way that the homo sapiens were able to transform their world -- their own context -- and in the process transform the conditions in which they came to grasp themselves. What is that something? I propose that the "something" that happened was the dawning of **self-consciousness as a social phenomenon**. With the development of individual self-consciousness, a transformation was effected in the collective mentality. The dawning of self-consciousness, as a socially current vision of human identity, led to the idea of an **interconnectedness** between **individual self-consciousness** and **consciousness of the community** so far as it found expression in social phenomena, such as the communities which sustained the efforts of Plato and Aristotle. In brief, it was the realization of this **interconnection** which made it meaningful for Pericles' in the funeral oration to identify the individual self-consciousness as **freedom** made possible by the **community** or polis,² for Socrates to investigate individual identity, in Plato's Republic, by examining the structure of the ideal state, since the community was supposed to reflect an enlightened individual self-consciousness,³ and for Aristotle in the Politics to insist that individual self-consciousness could be properly discovered only within the political consciousness of the

community.⁴ This enlightened individual self-consciousness consists in an understanding of one's nature as fundamentally **rational and self-reflective**; in a transformed context, human identity came to acquire a new meaning. The development of human consciousness underwent, as I shall go on to suggest, a **phase transition** in the social organization which transformed the internal organization of the social fabric, and in the process led humans to reformulate an approach aimed at discovering and unfolding their self-identity. The idea of a **phase transition**, unlike Renfrew's idea of the **multiplier effect** -- that many developments came together spurring on each others growth -- supposes a quantum-mechanical picture of communities, and the self-consciousness which characterizes it, rather than a classically modelled one.⁵ With successive **phase transitions**, human identity came to be recognized as a **problem**. We came to recognize that we are the only creatures whose meaning consists in the questioning of our own existence; the consciousness of our being-here is the consciousness of a problem. And not only a problem, our self-consciousness directs us to a **project**. Once our identity became questionable, in this sense, humans found themselves challenged by their predicament and at once compelled to address it.

The thesis being advanced is that, in the context of the growth and development of human consciousness, a new vision of human identity, which proved to be both novel and historically decisive for western civilization, became socially current by the close of the classical period; unlike other assessments of human identity which attained social currency, the dawning of **self-consciousness as a social phenomenon** is marked by confident declarations that nature has a comprehensible and organized structure which can be discovered, and in the process of that discovery reveals to the discoverer the internal organization of the **human mentality or human nature, interconnected** in the context of a wider view of nature. With regard to the development of hominids, in their long history, we can place that historically decisive discovery by the close of the classical period in Greece.

Self-consciousness was neither a social phenomenon in the archaic period, nor so far as we can tell, in any preceding civilization, so far as various anthropological investigations have been able to suggest. The dawning of the primacy of **self-consciousness** points to an individual's realization of an inner potential, an unfolding which already presupposes a kind of social equality made possible by the **polis**. In book XVIII of the *Odyssey* [130ff], however, Odysseus declares the predicament of

human nature, so far as the "Homeric" or "epic" mentality could grasp it. In the confrontation with a disorderly and chaotic world, the best advice, says Odysseus, most clever of all the Greeks, is simply to accept what has been given. The epic mentality supposes not merely a universe lacking in organization; it supposes that human nature lacks the capacity to discover an underlying order, even if there were such a structure. The mentality which we may call "Homeric," "epic," or even "mythic" was advanced, challenged, and transformed by various poetic enterprises -- most especially, Hesiod, the lyric and elegiac poets, the tragic and comic **mytho-poesis**.⁶ By the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the epic/mythic mentality proclaimed by Odysseus, had run its initial course. Nietzsche was right, however else we may consider his critique of classical antiquity: with Socrates and Euripides, we witness the **optimism of reason**, the supposition that very many things -- if not all things -- can be known,⁷ a position diametrically opposed to that of Odysseus, and one peculiarly descriptive of the newly articulated discovery of **self-consciousness**.

It seems that we can document no earlier time for this critical development of human cultural -- not biological -- evolution.⁸ By the close of the classical period, with the writings of Plato and Aristotle, we have documented the **elaborately articulated and historically decisive discovery of human identity as fundamentally intellectual and moral**.⁹ To the newly accepted self-reflective question: "Who am I?" came the new and socially current answer: "Human being is fundamentally "contemplative" and "obligatory" -- **to know the good is at once to do it**.¹⁰ In order to come to this realization, a great deal of time was required. A result was that human consciousness became conscious of itself as an object; subjectivity discovered itself as an object to be investigated like other objects. And self-reflection proved to be the method by which the subject investigates itself as an object, by which consciousness becomes conscious of itself.¹¹ I am supposing that our earliest ancestors were **not** self-conscious in **this** sense. This development did not come overnight, nor did it self-consciousness consist in **fits and starts**; and we can follow that development by observing some peculiar "starts".

The characteristic of each "start" may be profitably explored in the context of a **dialectical tension**, conceived in almost general way, between a mentality which operates under one context or **paradigm**, and that same mentality which comes to discover another more encompassing context which is not wholly

