MALS 70000: Inventing the Self
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Professor Jason Tougaw

Alva Noë,
Out of Our Heads: Why You are Not Your Brain and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness

In this book I advance this truly astonishing hypothesis: to understand consciousness in human and animals, we must look not inward, into the recesses of our insides; rather, we need to look to the ways in which each of us, as a whole animal, carries on the processes of living in and with and in response to the world around us. **(Noë 7)**

In this book, I use the term "consciousness" to mean, roughly, experience. And I think of experience, broadly, as encompassing thinking, feeling, and the fact that a world "shows up" for us in perception. Many writers have sought to define terms more narrowly than this. No doubt there are important distinctions that can, and for certain purposes at least, should be drawn. For example, a contrast is often made between thought and cognition, on the one hand, and sensation and feeling, or phenomenal experience on the other. . . . Meaningful thought arises only for the whole animal dynamically engaged with its environment, or so I contend. And indeed the same is true for the quality of our conscious episodes. **(Noë 8)**

But if I am right, whole research programs have to be set aside. It is misguided to search for neural correlates of consciousness—at least if these are understood, as they sometimes are, to be neural structures or processes that are alone sufficient for consciousness. There are no such neural structures… **(Noë 185)**

I confess that in my gloomier moments I have wondered if a whole host of intellectual theories don't fall into the category of grand confabulation**. (Hustvedt 54; ebook 43/159)**

The closest we can get to this entrance into another person's psyche is through reading. Reading is the mental arena where different thought styles, tough and tender, and the ideas generated by them become more apparent. We have access to a stranger's internal narrator. Reading, after all, is a way of living inside another person's words. His or her voice becomes my narrator for the duration. Of course, I retain my own critical faculties, pausing to say to myself, *Yes, he's right about that* or *No, he's forgotten this point entirely or That's a clichéd character*, but the more compelling the voice on the page is, the more I lose my own. I am seduced and give myself up to the other person's words. **(Hustvedt 148; ebook 106/159)**

If this picture of narrative identity I have sketched is correct, autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living. We don't, though, tend to give much thought to this process of self-narration precisely because, after years of practice, we do it so well. When this identity story practice is disrupted, however, we can be jolted into awareness of the central role it plays in organizing our social world. (4) **(*Living Autobiographically* 4)**

. . . I will make a case for "the organic basis of everything we are" by arguing not only that self and story emerge from our lives in and as bodies, but that our extended selves, our narrative identities, may contribute to the well-being of our bodily existence. **(*Living Autobiographically* 59)**

This book is dedicated to addressing two questions. First: how does the brain construct a mind? Second: how does the brain make that mind conscious? **(*Self* 4)**

Nor is the dignity of that human mind diminished by connecting it to the astonishing complexity and beauty to be found inside living cells and tissues. On the contrary, connecting personhood to biology is a ceaseless source of awe and respect for anything human. Last, naturalizing the mind may solve one mystery but only to raise the curtain on other mysteries quietly awaiting their turn. **(*Self* 29)**

When Alva Noë Sounds Like Antonio Damasio

What governs the character of our experience—what makes experience the kind of experience it is—is not the neural activity in our brains on its own; it is, rather, our ongoing dynamic relation to objects, a relation that, as in this case, clearly depends on our neural responsiveness to changes in our relation to things. (Noë 59)

"As one struggles to understand the neural basis of mind, one may well ask if the foregoing is good news or bad. One way is to feel somewhat discouraged by so much booming, buzzing confusion and despair that a clear, well-lighted pattern can ever be gleaned from the biological mess. But one might also embrace complexity wholeheartedly and realize that the brain needs the seeming mess in order to generate something as rich, smooth, and adaptive as mental states" (*Self* 92).

When Alva Noë Sounds Like Antonio Damasio, Part 2

In fact, the perspective that we need, from which the meaningful, nonmechanical nature of conscious life can come into focus, is none other than the biological perspective. No living being is merely a mechanism, even though every biological system can be viewed as merely physical and so, in some suitable sense, as merely mechanical. Take, for example, a bacterium. It ahs size and weight and is acted on by physical forces and chemical processes. A given bacterium may move in the direction of greater intensities of sugar, owing to direct biochemical linkages between sugar-sensitive receptors and its flagella. The bacterium might seem to be geared into its environment in a machinelike way. But in fact, in thus describing the bacterium, we have already smuggled a nonchemical, nonphysical conception of the bacterium as, precisely, a unity, a one whose actions can be considered as actions, and in relation to the question "Why?" arises. The bacterium is geared into the world not merely in the sense that the presence of sugar causes a certain bacteriumlike congeries of atoms to migrate in the direction of greater intensity of sugar: the bacterial mesh with its surroundings is of a different quality than that. The bacterium needs sugar to live and is adapted into its surroundings, and that's why it is impelled toward sugar. The bacterium is not merely a process, it is an agent, however simple. It has interests. It wants and needs sugar. (Noe 39)

The Self, According to You

Preparation

1. Choose a claim that both surprised and convinced you from one of our course texts. (It might be a big claim or a narrow or local one.)
2. Choose a rhetorical technique from one of these texts that you'd like to emulate in your writing.
3. Choose a rhetorical technique from one of these texts that you'd prefer to avoid in your own writing.

Now

1. You've been invited to deliver a paper at a conference entitled "Inventing the Self." Your job is to make an argument on behalf a claim about the origins, mechanisms, or meanings of selfhood from the literature in a discipline of your choice.
2. What evidence might you use to support the claim?
3. What counterarguments might you address and refute or complicate?
4. What is your stance, and what techniques will you use to make it clear to your audience?
5. What rhetorical techniques might you adopt or avoid?