

Concordia Forum
Volume 2, Issue 1, September 20th, 2019
"where I end and you begin"

Massachusetts Hall

Present: Mike, Nikki, Paige, Lorenzo, Jack, Mollie, Jack, Beth, Joe,
Bruce, Brianna, Andrew

Presiding: Mollie

Your correspondent: Andrew

7:15 PM - the call to order, introductory words from Mollie and Andrew: procedures, the premise of this topic, the discussion begins.

The first few minutes saw several provocative framings of the questions: if the concept of self is socially constructed, perhaps it is a fool's errand to talk about it at all. How does the self speak of an "I" separate from any predicate form, "I am X," or, more broadly, how does the self distinguish between essential and contingent attributes:

The readings point against the notion of a single authentic self at the core of each individual's being, the popular self-help model of the self.

The force of these readings is to complicate the intuitive boundaries of the self

The microbiome makes a difference between genetic identity and some other kind of identity

Do only human beings have a self?

And here we spoke at some length about animals, consciousness, sentience, and some thought experiments about where we might locate the self. Anaesthetics, which shut down consciousness but leave other brain functions in place, point to the physical basis of consciousness in the brain, but don't locate it definitively. There might be some quantum funny business going on.

Some, including your correspondent, find the category of the self useful as a moral concept—whatever its relationship to other psychological or biological ideas, the self makes a moral claim for respect from others.

As is the way of the world, the conversation turned into one about language, as we sought to clarify our terms, and competing philosophies of language emerged. Alas, this was not the day when the nominalism-realism divide was settled for ever.

At about 8:15, we took a break for tea, and your correspondent went to town on some twix bars.

The remaining discussion turned to ecological and, at times, cosmological issues.

The status of non-human selves remains open, but the room seemed sympathetic to the idea of a moral obligation from humans towards an ecosystem, to earth, or to other individual animals and plants. Perhaps the human-as-ecosystem model from the Yong reading informs this idea, perhaps not.

The difference between world cultures on matters of extraction economy, sustainability, and moral attitude towards the world, was noted. As were the difference in culture as pertains to the self: many cultures have a much less robust idea of the individual human as self than ours.

As we concluded, some ideas bubbled up for future readings, including religious and anthropological ideas.

If you have thoughts about what you'd like to read next, please contact Mollie. Likewise, if I have missed something in these minutes, or if you have anything to add or correct.

At 9:05, the party adjourned to Moderation. About what happened there, Carsonian discretion is the order of the day.