Part I

A constructionist framework for person and self

For I tried to expose the falsity or uncertainty of the propositions I was examining by clear and certain arguments […] and I never encountered any proposition so doubtful that I could not draw from it some quite certain conclusion, if only the conclusion that it contained nothing certain.

Réne Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge University Press 1985)

1 The main themes: virtual selves, mind–body dualism and natural science

There is nothing more intriguing than one's own 'self'. Yet there is also nothing more opaque than the process of reflecting on self. It is a familiar mental activity, sometimes involving great effort. But whether this effort produces results is uncertain. Long deliberation may be followed by an impulse to act that flies in the face of one's own good counsel. Despite doubts of this nature, most people who reflect on the matter have a strong desire to be in charge of themselves, however difficult the task and uncertain the outcome. Self, in western society, has become a central idea. It is the focus of an endless number of popular and academic books. Since the seventeenth century, it has become attached as a prefix to an increasing number of words, such as self-esteem. In sum, self is central to our beliefs, and in this important area of our life we do not want to be led – by authority, dogma, or false prophets. It is a journey we take alone whether or not we find ourselves surrendering control to others. It is widely supposed that we have to find ourselves.

The theme running through this book is that our common-sense idea of self as some sort of entity is a human construction, in effect, a virtual reality. This perspective is by no means original. Berrios and Marková (2003: 9) interpret St Augustine (354–430) as meaning by self 'a metaphorical or virtual space within which theological models of responsibility, guilt and sin could be played out'. Over the centuries, however, belief in the existence of the self as an entity has become firmly entrenched, and it is an integral part of our view of the cosmos. The point of stressing that self is a human construction is to suggest that, as an idea, it is not inevitable. I will view it as a feature of the historical and cultural circumstances in which we live. As such, it is closely related to concepts of the person. However, I will also be arguing for the biological reality of persons and the need to reconcile scientific with folk perspectives.

This topic is such a slippery one conceptually that I will try to be clear and consistent in my use of terms. I will refer to our intimate knowledge of self as the 'sense-of-self'. This is what we feel and know

from the inside, so to speak, as expressed through a common language. It was captured pretty well by William James (1842–1910) as the sum total of what a person identifies with or calls 'mine'. In other words, it is anything felt to be a part of one's self, whether 'in the mind' or extended into the environment, like one's home or one's job. A sense-of-self presupposes a power to choose, a continuity of memory, an identification by age and sex, etc.

The sense-of-self becomes slippery as soon as we ask what it is self refers to, and, if it is supposed to be an entity, how that entity relates to biological processes or social and linguistic practices. Self is such a centrally important idea that it inevitably finds expression at many levels in both the natural and social sciences. In the next few paragraphs I will sketch out a 'position statement' and elaborate upon it in the rest of the book.

First of all, my own assumption that self is a virtual entity refers to the fact that we have to construct it by analogy with other entities of a public nature. It has an 'as if' existence in much the same way that 'the mind' has been treated as if it were a telephone switchboard or a computer. Self as a virtual entity is not something we immediately comprehend simply by looking into ourselves and introspecting its nature. As I argue in Chapters 11 and 12, a sense-of-self and its associated beliefs is part of a cultural legacy, learned in infancy, and a product of a long process of human social evolution. This does not mean that a virtual self is fictional or illusory. I argue that the reality in which we live our lives cannot be described only in literal terms; it needs analogical, metaphorical and virtual crutches to render it intelligible, explicable and shareable.

Of course, people refer to each other literally, as individual persons, usually with a name or identification tag. In fact, we are known in this minimal way by governmental authorities. In addition, it is common to imagine a figurative analogue of a person inside us – a kind of little person 'in our mind' that we consult about our (its) opinions and decisions. In Chapter 8, I discuss how this modern understanding of self developed out of earlier concepts of soul and spirit. In Chapter 12, I speculate about the role of analogical reasoning in the evolution of self-reference from hominids to *Homo sapiens*.

The systematic study of persons and selves by philosophers and scientists clarifies, deepens or goes entirely beyond the common-sense view. Within the human and social sciences, persons and selves have been conceived both as natural organisms and as human agents reflexively studying themselves. One of the themes I explore is the conflict between these two perspectives and also the more general point that any learned reflection on the nature of persons has the potential to change

our common-sense view of them. In other words, as self-interpreting animals, groping with virtual realities, we are likely to be attracted to metaphors and explanations supplied by science and speculative thought in general. Following Freud, we analyse slips of the tongue for hidden impulses. And now, with neuroscience as powerful as it is, we imagine that our low moods are caused by depletions of brain chemicals. The influence between common sense and learned reflection is two-way because the former is also the jumping-off point for the latter.

Although it is usual to think of persons as more substantial or real than selves, the criteria for being a person are also a product of local historical and cultural circumstances and therefore, in part, conventional. A person is a kind of hybrid entity, a biological human being who comes to be perceived by others and who perceives her or himself in ways that are shaped by the society in which they live. In view of the obvious biological constraints on becoming a person, and also logical arguments for the necessity of the empirical reality of persons (Strawson 1959), I will treat the concept of person as more fundamental than a concept of self. Discussion of the relationship between biological human beings, persons and selves can be traced back principally to the philosopher John Locke (1632–1704). He set in train a set of intellectual puzzles that still stir up obstinate disagreements today, and this book can be seen as a continuation of these debates.

Part I of the book develops a constructionist position on person and self. The essential idea of construction is that human beings, through their joint activity, constitute their reality in a particular form. By joint activity, I mean what they are doing together and how they communicate about what they are doing. I do not assume that people are necessarily aware of this process. Adopting a natural attitude, reality is simply taken 'at face value' for that social group. Of course, the way ordinary folk construe persons and selves differs from the way natural scientists conceive of human beings. I will examine these differences, including the way persons and selves have been understood as entities (their ontological status) within different schools of thought in social science.

Some critics of constructionism, such as Malcolm Williams (1999: 85), have taken it to imply that everything we perceive is somehow an artefact of social practices. He asserts that one of the tasks of science is to distinguish between what is 'real' and what is constructed as 'real'. I agree that scientists produce theoretical explanations about 'real' forces that exist independently of us, such as gravity, and no one assumes, I think, that people themselves construct the force of gravity. However, I take it that our conception of gravity is constructed by practising scientists. An assumption I make throughout this book is that there

is a unified and independent physical reality. So, in arguing that self has been constructed as a virtual entity, I am not suggesting that it is unrelated to natural reality; I only argue that it is not related as directly to natural reality as 'gravity' appears to be. This is true of many constructed entities, including many early attempts to understand the world naturalistically. I am advocating that we should study the beliefs and social practices associated with talk about selves and relate them to natural processes.

Constructionists have been relatively uninterested in natural science except to study science as a social activity. They have explored where ideas about human nature come from, how they are justified and how they relate to a culture's social practices. This book goes further in seeking a productive dialogue between constructionists and natural scientists with respect to persons and selves. I will adopt the view of science (*naturalism*) put forward by Roy Bhaskar (1979: 9) in which scientific activity is construed as a search for the (universal and *unobserved*) structures, generative mechanisms and laws that can account for events *observed*, often in contrived experimental situations. Bhaskar put forward this conception to replace the idea that causal laws can be reduced to regularities in sequences of experienced events (1979: 15).

Bhaskar notes that two schools of thought have dominated the scene within the social sciences. In the first, the search for empirical regularities amounts to a registration of systematic co-variation between discrete events. An example would be, say, the relationship between patterns of migration and expectations of economic benefit. The second school emphasises the interpretation of unique events rather than the formation of general laws. In one version of interpretation, people's acts are assumed to reflect the mental state of human agents in their cultural and historical context. For instance, in the example given above, it would advocate interviewing migrants to discover their unique reasons for migrating (see Benton and Craib 2001, for Bhaskar's views on social science). I will now expand on these various points in relation to person and self, and also on Bhaskar's *critical realist* view of social science as a complement to constructionism.

If, as I suggested earlier, people employ analogy to interpret the world and their own activities, it is likely that their conceptions will differ considerably from models produced by natural science. Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that common sense can be modelled on science, especially as the former is likely to be much more concerned with persuasion and justification than with prediction. However, 'our common sense', can be explored both naturalistically – what natural mechanisms are implicated in the way we think as we do – and also interpretively.

Interpretation enlarges upon common sense by reflecting in a systematic and disciplined way on what people say and do, paying attention to an interpretation's completeness, exhaustiveness and consistency (Seale 1999). Any attempt to reconcile biological and social sciences would have to be compatible with the results of interpretation, but a more systematic description of 'common sense' does not necessarily provide a basis for reconciling the various sciences. For instance, interpretivists cannot easily depart from the assumption that people 'really' have minds or exercise autonomous agency, assumptions that could be questioned from a natural perspective. The relationship between common sense and natural science is an enduring problem that I attempt to tackle throughout the book. One solution within the philosophy of science has been to reject the possibility of integrating concepts of natural causation with the results of interpretation. I will now briefly turn to consider the views of those philosophers who have taken this stance.

One way to distinguish interpretive from scientific explanation is to see it as involving reasons rather than causes. It is clear that the sort of criteria for describing a person's act as governed by reason differ from the conventions that natural scientists follow in describing events in a causal explanation. One obvious difference concerns standards of description. Everyday interpretations include all kinds of value judgements and unexamined assumptions; by contrast, scientists attempt to eliminate any 'excess meaning' that is not essential to defining a phenomenon according to their theoretical assumptions. Ordinary folk tend not to spell out their taken-for-granted assumptions. For a discipline such as psychology, there exists the obvious problem of separating terms that belong legitimately to a natural, causal mode of explanation from the terms of everyday reasoning, such as intentions and goals.

Another difference concerns the meaning of 'rule-governed' behaviour. Thomas Leahey (2003: 126–143) represents it as a contrast between *natural rules* (or laws) which have to be obeyed and *constitutive rules* which are similar to the rules of a game, whether implicit or explicit, which have to be enforced. The rules governing reasons are of a constitutive type, and, obviously enough, the rules that any culture happens to uphold can be, and often are, disobeyed. These rules regulate how we ought to behave rather than how we do in fact behave. In the case of constitutive rules, something is true or false by definition. The concept of truth and error built into norms and conventions means that it is simply incorrect to call Bill by the name of Fred if that is not his name. Likewise, 2 + 2 cannot make 5 if certain conventions are followed. In the case of natural law, error is probabilistic and associated with the match between theoretical prediction and empirical

observation. It is believed that nature is lawful, but, at the same time, it is assumed that our methods of measurement and theoretical predictions are associated with a margin of error.

I intend to avoid setting up causes and reasons as incompatible, that is, producing explanations that could not, in principle, be reconciled, but I will leave it to the final chapter to discuss this problem in detail. I will also argue against a *naive* reduction of constitutive rules or 'norms' to 'natural laws' while recognising the need to show how the two could be related. A key question seems to be whether the formation and maintenance of social norms can be made compatible with an explanation in terms of universal, natural processes. I assume that this question can be answered affirmatively but I also suggest that in whatever way natural mechanisms are involved in installing a normative influence over human affairs, the causal processes implicated in their installation are not necessarily as interesting as the causal consequences of the existence of the norms themselves.

For example, once a child has learned to repeat the two-times table correctly, the natural capacity to learn this skill, on which the educational process relies, ceases to hold much interest. The ability to reason about numbers and apply numerical concepts to practical tasks is the significant outcome, and these abilities and their consequences are involved in higher-level social processes that, in my view, can also be studied naturalistically. I suggest that the fact that rules in mathematics have been given a conventional form is not incompatible with a naturalistic account of their evolutionary development or current maintenance by social processes.

There is little doubt that social conventions have had far-reaching implications, especially in logic, mathematics and science. The norms and practices of science have led to a theoretical understanding of many aspects of human behaviour. But in areas where the number of variables to consider is inordinately large, their historical influence untraceable, and we lack any credible natural theory to relate them together, the attempt to make predictions from an understanding of universal natural processes would be futile. Society is an open system in which 'mechanisms coexist and interact with one another in contingent ways' (Benton and Craib 2001: 129). Consequently, the social sciences cannot rely wholly on explaining through natural mechanisms but must utilise a knowledge of regularities derived from a variety of sources – a practical knowledge of culture and language, an imaginative projection into unfamiliar situations, manuals and rule books, etc. I assume that knowledge of constitutive rules is essentially a form of practical knowledge which is compatible with natural causation even though, like the

weather, it is neither feasible nor possible to explain in fine detail. Of course, constitutive rules often take for granted a tacit understanding of natural processes that conforms closely (or depends upon) natural-science explanations.

While I clearly endorse the constructionist emphasis on regularities constituted within social practices, this book will also examine the limitations of this perspective. One of my targets for criticism is the idea that processes or entities theorised in terms of natural causes exist at a 'lower level' than norms, intentions, acts, etc., theorised about at a 'higher' cultural or personal level. This orientation to the cause–reason issue has been very clearly stated by Elmer Sprague (1999) who draws heavily on the later writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). Wittgenstein contributed a central notion to constructionist thinking which is that the meaning of words and sentences can be discovered in how they are used in practical activities such as giving orders or describing events (Sprague 1999: 37–66). The main message is that speech is intertwined with action and conforms to a game-like structure in which persons have agreed the rules, implicit or explicit, for correct use. These various 'language games' as Wittgenstein called them are, in turn, linked to forms of social life.

Forms of life undergo change, and, consequently, language games may fall out of use and new ones may come into existence. The rules for the game are said to be expressed in a person's behaviour and are cited as 'reasons' if a person is called upon to explain their action, e.g., 'Why did you call him Bill? Because that's his name.' As Sprague (1999: 88) sums it up: 'Wittgenstein contrasts citing a reason to explain what persons are doing with finding a cause for a change in a physical object', and in so doing, Sprague maintains, Wittgenstein 'rescues persons from the omnicompetence of physics'. As well as denying that natural (physical) processes could provide an adequate explanation for human activities as we ordinarily describe them, Sprague also argues strongly against the view that a person's reasons for acting are some kind of 'mental' thing. Sprague dubs his own position as 'personism' to contrast it with 'mindism'.

Personism is a succinct description of Sprague's position, and it refers to a level of explanation grounded in the attributes of persons. This distinguishes it from the sub-personal level that refers to parts of a person such as activities in the brain or so-called mental mechanisms. Personists usually subsume interpersonal relationships within personism, but I will make out a case for saying that they constitute a level of causation that deserves consideration in its own right. I am going to use the term 'supra-personal' to refer to explanations grounded in the

causal consequences of relationships between persons. My aim in this book is to avoid slipping into 'mindism' (as Sprague calls it), and I will reinterpret anything to do with 'the mental' in terms of sub-personal, personal and supra-personal levels of explanation.

Sprague himself reinterprets a person's so-called mental powers as their disposition to behave in certain ways. He uses arguments of Gilbert Ryle (1900–76) that I discuss at greater length in Chapter 2. For Sprague, reference to the mind and its mental states is just 'a way of talking' that should be understood correctly as reference to the dispositions, capacities, abilities and acts of *persons*, not minds. Persons are considered to be the agents of their acts. According to personism, it is not necessary to explain acts by mental acts of will; the person acts, period. Persons don't act in isolation, of course, and their reasons for acting often only make sense in the context of their social practices. They follow social conventions, as noted earlier.

Although I will be taking up many of the arguments for personism, the latter is usually presented in a way that cannot be reconciled with naturalism. Personists assume that a person's acts are explicable only in terms of the local norms and concepts that apply to persons (intentions, reasons, etc.) and not by natural causes. For Sprague, mechanisms and processes in the mind/brain can only explain things at a sub-personal level. As Sprague (1999: 88) puts it, 'Wittgenstein makes persons their own kind of thing, unlike any other kind of thing […] The doings of persons are not to be explained by causes, even by internal, hidden causes.' On the one hand, in favour of personism, it does seem to make sense from a natural-science perspective to treat the whole organism as a functional unit. People and many animals recognise each other as whole individuals and direct their acts towards them as whole units. Similarly, an organism's health is often best viewed as a state of the whole organism, even though health is not an entirely personal matter. On the other hand, if a person's status as a person is, in part, assigned by other persons, a person is not entirely 'their own kind of thing' (Sprague 1999: 88). A person is not *sui generis* a person. Persons do not pronounce themselves persons until they have learned to do so.

Moreover, persons do not explain everything they do in person-level concepts. For instance, we simply take it for granted that we can naturally produce the sounds that make up words, and occasionally we note that a natural process, like a cold, can produce a croaky voice. We cannot help sounding croaky, not that we have a reason for producing a croaky voice. This admittedly trivial example illustrates how rule-governed and 'naturally caused' behaviour are combined in common sense. Theorists influenced by Wittgenstein such as Jeff Coulter (1983)