



WHO AM I ?
 ONE AMONG
 BILLIONS
 OF INDIVIDUALS
 PRODUCED BY
 BILLIONS OF
 YEARS OF ORGA-
 NIC EVOLUTION,
 HUNDREDS OF
 MILLIONS OF
 YEARS OF ANI-
 MAL EVOLU-
 TION, MILLIONS
 OF YEARS OF
 HUMAN EVOLU-
 TION, TENTHOU-
 SAND YEARS OF
 CULTURAL
 HISTORY, AND A
 FEW DECADES
 OF PERSONAL
 HISTORY...

Notice that when we look back to see what made us who we are, our past is readily accessible only in the first layer of what makes us who we are: our personal history, the experiences of a lifetime which shape our knowledge, skills and attitudes. Yet behind that lies the history of the culture into which we were born, bequeathed to us first and foremost through the concepts, categories, and idioms of the mothertongue we learned in playful rapport with our mothers, and further through the distinctive codes and customs, rites and rituals, mores and morals, tales and traditions that became ours as part of acquiring competence in whatever culture we regard as ours. And behind all that lies what we inherit from our evolutionary past through the structure of our bodies and their modes of functioning, by far the most massive and profound presupposition of our existence. It extends to far more than gross anatomy, because it includes the structure of our brains, including its provisions for our motivational systems, our intellect and much else besides. We do not choose to enter puberty or menopause, nor do we do so at the behest of our culture, though it might harbor all kinds of customs and expectations with regard to such stages of life. No, they are mandated by biology, and those are simply stray examples of the way our evolutionary past intrudes directly on our lives. Many an emotion stirring in our breasts conveys the advice of our evolutionary past regarding what to do about a variety of situations we are likely to encounter in the course of a day or a life. They reflect, among other things, the fact that long ago some who felt very differently about such situations did not live long enough or well enough to become our ancestors, to put a complex matter crudely. A simple thing like the pleasant smell of fruity esters is not something we came upon by discovering for ourselves the nutritional value of fruit: it is a bias built into our sense of smell that leads us on to the source of those esters even before we know what fruits are. Such biases are determined on the basis of differential success on the part of vast numbers of ancestors, and are laid down in the structure and mode of functioning of our brains. Needless to say, in a social species they include substantial ones in the sphere of social motivation as well. Since they exert their influence over us in many a subtle way and combination, it is reassuring to know that they have been subject to real life testing and honing for millions of years through the unbroken chains of ancestors that gave us the bodies and brains with which we go about our life pursuits, being or trying to be who we are or think we are. To discover and become familiar with the full scope, pattern and interaction of these multiple sources of who we are is the ultimate challenge of self-knowledge.