

Part III

The Centrality of the Conscious Human Agent

Tallis is convinced that an overriding aim common to much twentieth-century thought has been the displacement of the conscious human agent from the centre of things. The attack on the human agent has been from two directions. First, the physical and biological sciences have been deployed to suggest that human consciousness, self-consciousness and behaviour are explicable in mechanical terms, the particular mechanisms being rooted in the drives and instincts that were necessary for our animal forebears to survive. Hence the self is not master in its own house: it is in the grip of and (unknown to itself) acts out forces and dramas that are derived from the remote past. Second, anti-humanist human sciences – Marxist historiography, sociology, psychoanalysis, structuralist anthropology, post-Saussurean linguistics – have been cited to support the notion that we are the playthings of various modes of cultural unconscious; that, far from being originators of our actions, even of our utterances and the meanings we wish to express through them, we are merely nodal points in a variety of systems – usually systems of signification – whose full nature is hidden from us, and it is these that drive our actions and confer their meaning on them.

It need hardly be stressed that this notion of the unconscious dominating over consciousness is profoundly at odds with the idea of ‘man, the explicit animal’ that Tallis has been propounding. The thrust of a substantial part of his argument has been to expose the self-contradictoriness of most of the arguments of those who would ‘marginalise consciousness’ and deny the fundamental differences between contemporary human society and animal communities or pre-historic cultures.