

* Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future *

Christophe Menant (Bordeaux)

Abstract

We all agree that our human minds are results of primate evolution. We humans are self-conscious. The separation of our human lineage from the chimpanzee one began about 7MY ago (pan-homo split). Specificities of human self-consciousness have been created during that time. Besides interesting approaches differing from the one proposed here [1], little is known about how these specificities came up [2, 3]. We propose here to address that subject with an evolutionary scenario using meaningful representations, identifications with conspecifics and anxiety management. Taking the beginning of the pan-homo split as a starting point we look at how an evolutionary scenario could have led to our present human self-consciousness as object and as subject. An evolutionary anxiety is highlighted as having been a key contributor to the evolutionary scenario with perspectives on a possible future of self-consciousness. Human self-consciousness is defined here as the meaningful representation of one's own entity, with the capability to think and talk about it. The evolutionary scenario proposed here is an extension of a previous version [11] that uses an evolution of meaningful representations also introduced in previous works [8]. The scenario starts with two types of meaningful representations carried by our pre-human ancestors: representations of parts of themselves (seen hands, heard shouting, actions, ...) and representations of conspecifics as entities existing in the environment. The next step uses elementary versions of intersubjectivity and of identifications with conspecifics that our primate ancestors were capable of. It is proposed that these performances have brought the two types of representations to merge and bring our ancestors to progressively represent their own entity as existing in the environment like conspecifics were represented. We consider that evolutionary approach as introducing an elementary form of self-consciousness as object and as subject, both coming in together. We group them into an "ancestral self-consciousness" which was to evolve into our human self-consciousness [4]. Such approach avoids the need of a pre-reflective self-consciousness [7]. The scenario considers that identifications took place also with suffering or dying conspecifics. These identifications were sources of specific new fears and anxieties that the scenario groups in an "evolutionary anxiety", source of important mental sufferings that our ancestors had to limit. Different possibilities were available for that. The scenario proposes that the chimpanzee lineage may have limited what was an unbearable mental suffering by stopping the development of identifications with conspecifics, and by this also stopping a possible evolution toward self-consciousness. This would have led to today chimpanzees. On the other side, our human lineage may have developed anxiety limitation tools like caring, pleasure, anticipation, communication and imitation; such tools also favoring the evolution of our lineage toward human minds. This is illustrated in the scenario by the introduction of an "evolutionary engine". In addition, the capacity for anticipation attached to self-consciousness has amplified the evolutionary anxiety, leading it to become an overall "ancestral anxiety" which is still present and active in our human minds (with anxiety limitations as a key constraints to satisfy). The many anxiety limitation processes introduced in our lineage during the pan-homo split were interrelated. Many came up in addition to the few ones listed here above. Most remain in our human minds at an unconscious level and are active in our everyday lives, much more than assumed so far. Considering a possible future of human self-consciousness, nothing tells that human evolution is terminated. Also, the evolutionary scenario introduces the possibility for some anxiety limitation processes to be sources of evil behaviors, more precisely related to a possible pleasure procured by the suffering of others [9]. That (disturbing) background could introduce a better understanding of human mind, and so be an entry point to its future in terms of potential improvements of human nature. The scenario also introduces an evolutionary nature of reflectivity [10] which can question the philosophical need for a pre-reflective self-consciousness. Such perspective can also introduce a naturalization of introspection, and then allow to consciously question the nature and content of our mental states. This could open a path for a tentative naturalization of the "what it is like" question for humans and make available an evolutionary link between self-consciousness and phenomenal consciousness. A last point to highlight is that the proposed evolutionary scenario uses performances of life like inter-subjectivity. This brings to note that a full understanding of the proposed scenario needs an understanding about the nature of life which is not available today. A lot remains to be done on these subjects. Continuations are introduced.

Key Words: self-consciousness, subject, object, evolution, anxiety, evil, pre-reflective self-consciousness, introspection

*** Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future ***

Non Self-conscious
Pre-Human Primates
(about 7 M years ago)

Evolution

HUMANS

Based on an Evolutionary Scenario for Self-Consciousness

Uses:

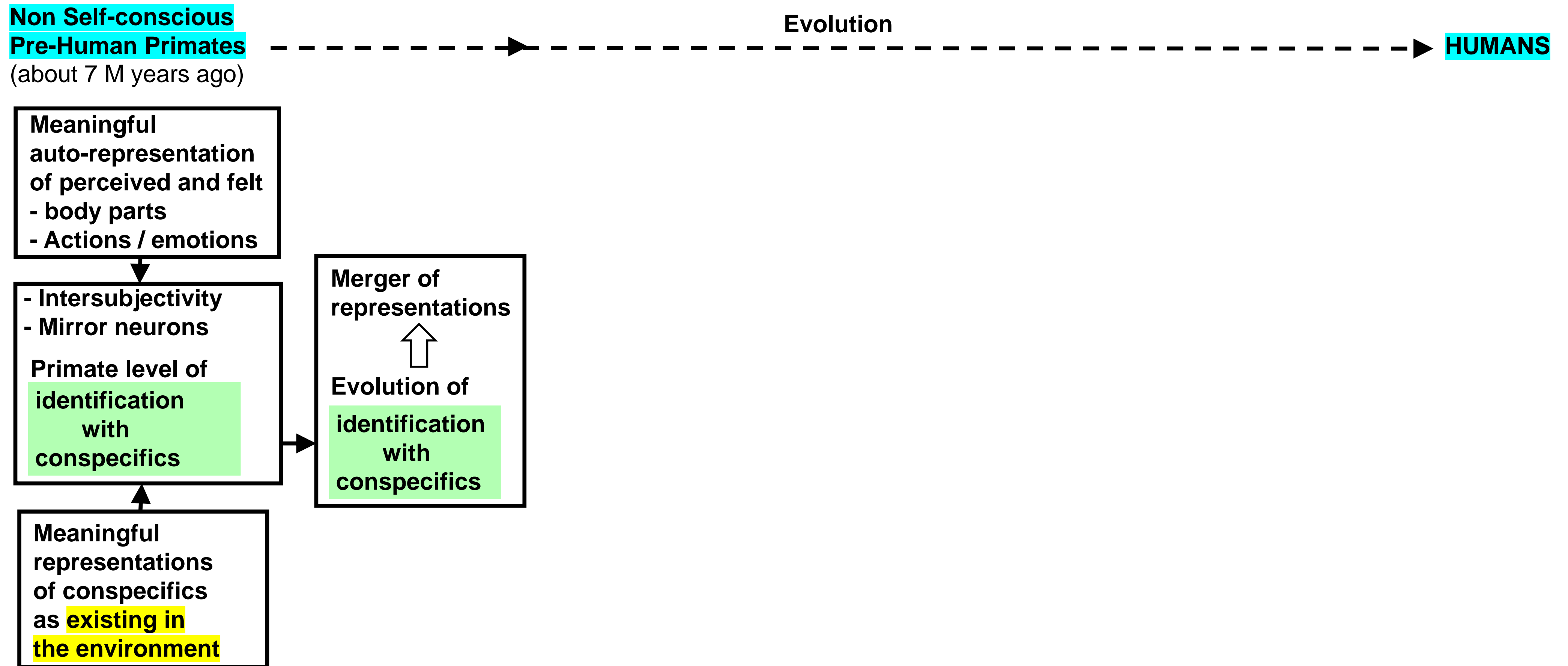
- * **Meaningful Representations.**
- * **Identification with conspecifics.**
- * **Anxiety management.**

Introduces:

- * **Evolutionary nature for a Reflective Self-Consciousness.**
- * **Evolutionary origin of an Ancestral Anxiety interlaced with Self-Consciousness.**
- * **Evolutionary Engine, still active and leading to possible future mental states.**
- * **Rational for the Pan-Homo split.**

CHIMPANZEES

* Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future *



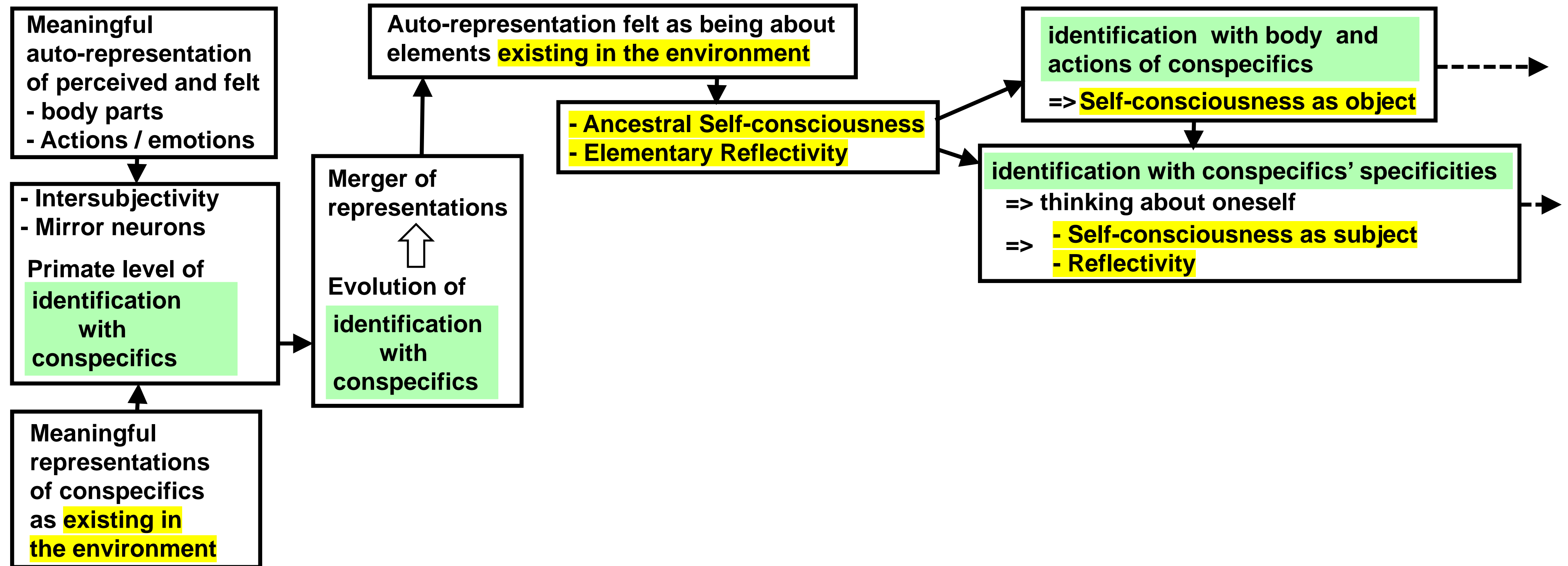
- 1) Our non self-conscious pre-human ancestors managed meaningful representations: [6]
 - An “auto-representation” about their body parts and actions (seen hands, heard shouting, felt grooming, ...)
 - Representations of conspecifics, represented as existing in the environment.
- 2) Our ancestors were capable of a limited identification with conspecifics.
 - Made possible a merger of the auto-representation with representations of parts of conspecifics [6]

* Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future *

Non Self-conscious
Pre-Human Primates
(about 7 M years ago)

Evolution

HUMANS



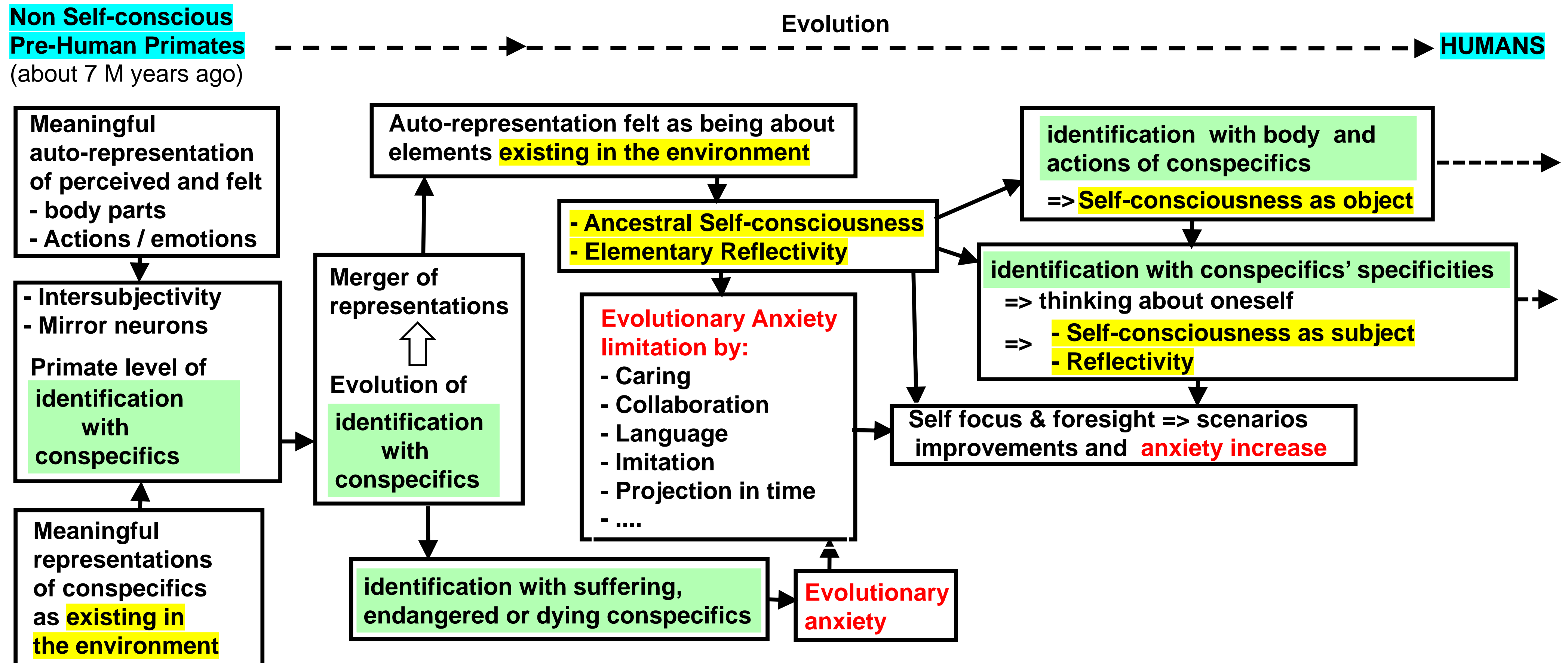
3) Merger of auto-representation with representations of parts of conspecifics led to: [6]

- Characteristics about representation of conspecifics progressively transferred to auto-representations => Subject progressively accessing a representation of its own entity as existing in the environment.
- Birth of an “ancestral self-consciousness” and of an “elementary reflectivity” [10].

4) Evolution => human self-consciousness [11]:

- Self consciousness as object from identification with body and actions of conspecifics.
- Self consciousness as subject and reflectivity from identifications with specificities of conspecifics.

* Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future *



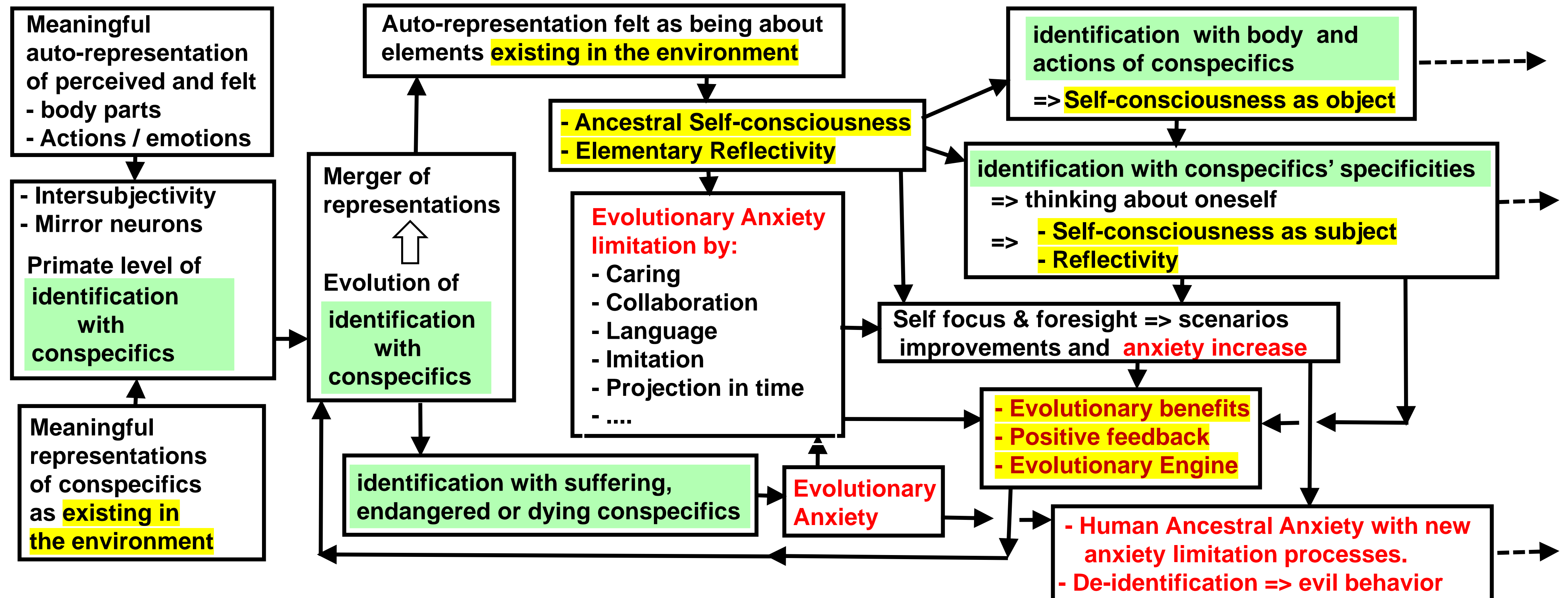
5) Identification with suffering or dying conspecifics => important mental suffering (Evolutionary Anxiety) [4].

6) Limitation of evolutionary anxiety by development of tools:
Caring, collaboration, communication (=> language), imitation, projection in time ... [6].

7) Self-focus and projection in time => conscious anticipation
=> action scenario improvements and production of new anxieties.

* Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future *

Non Self-conscious
Pre-Human Primates
(about 7 M years ago)



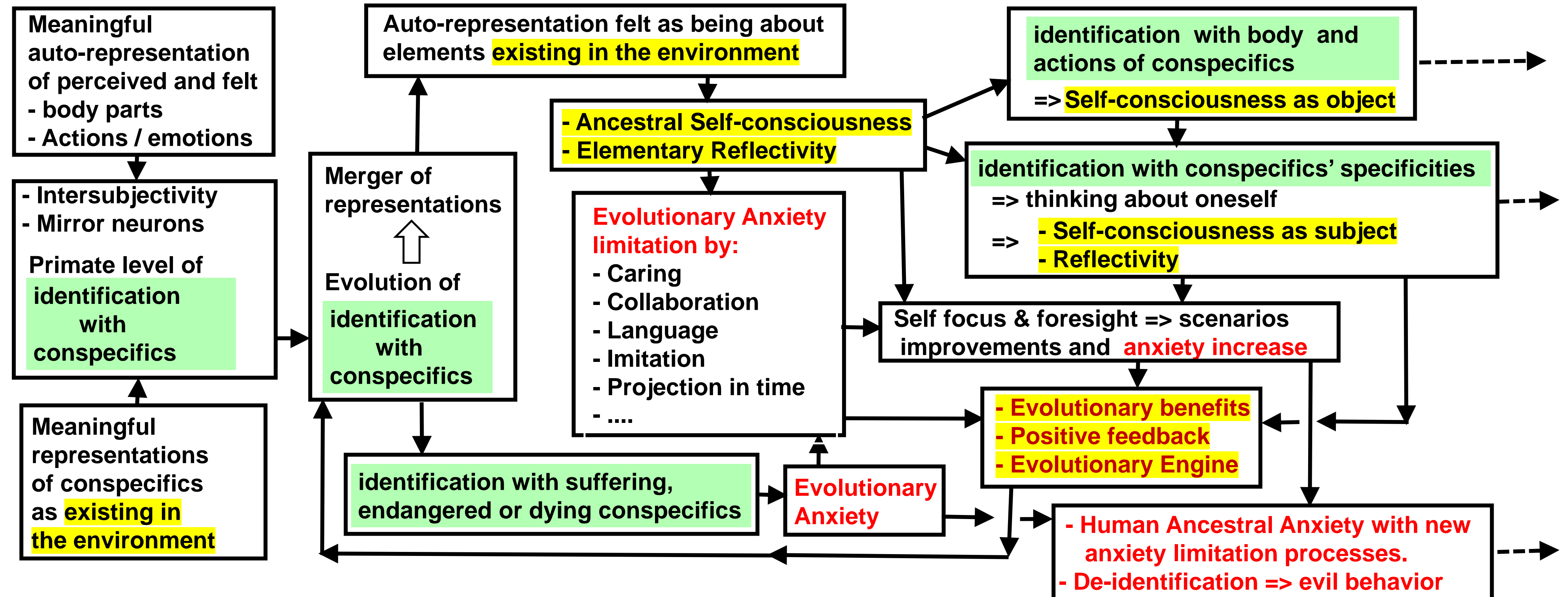
8) Evolutionary anxiety limitation tools => Evolutionary benefits => Positive feedback & evolutionary engine [4].

9) Evolutionary anxiety/anxiety increase => "Human Ancestral Anxiety" with new anxiety limitations processes:

- Pleasure seeking (ego valorization, Pascalian diversions, love, drugs, sex life, ...) with evolutionary benefits.
- Partial de-identification from conspecifics [9] => Anxiety limitation from less emotional attachment to others: Pleasure (less mental pain) from letting aside suffering others. Sufferings of others becomes source of pleasure => evil behavior as evolutionary part of human nature (ex: dehumanization).

* Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future *

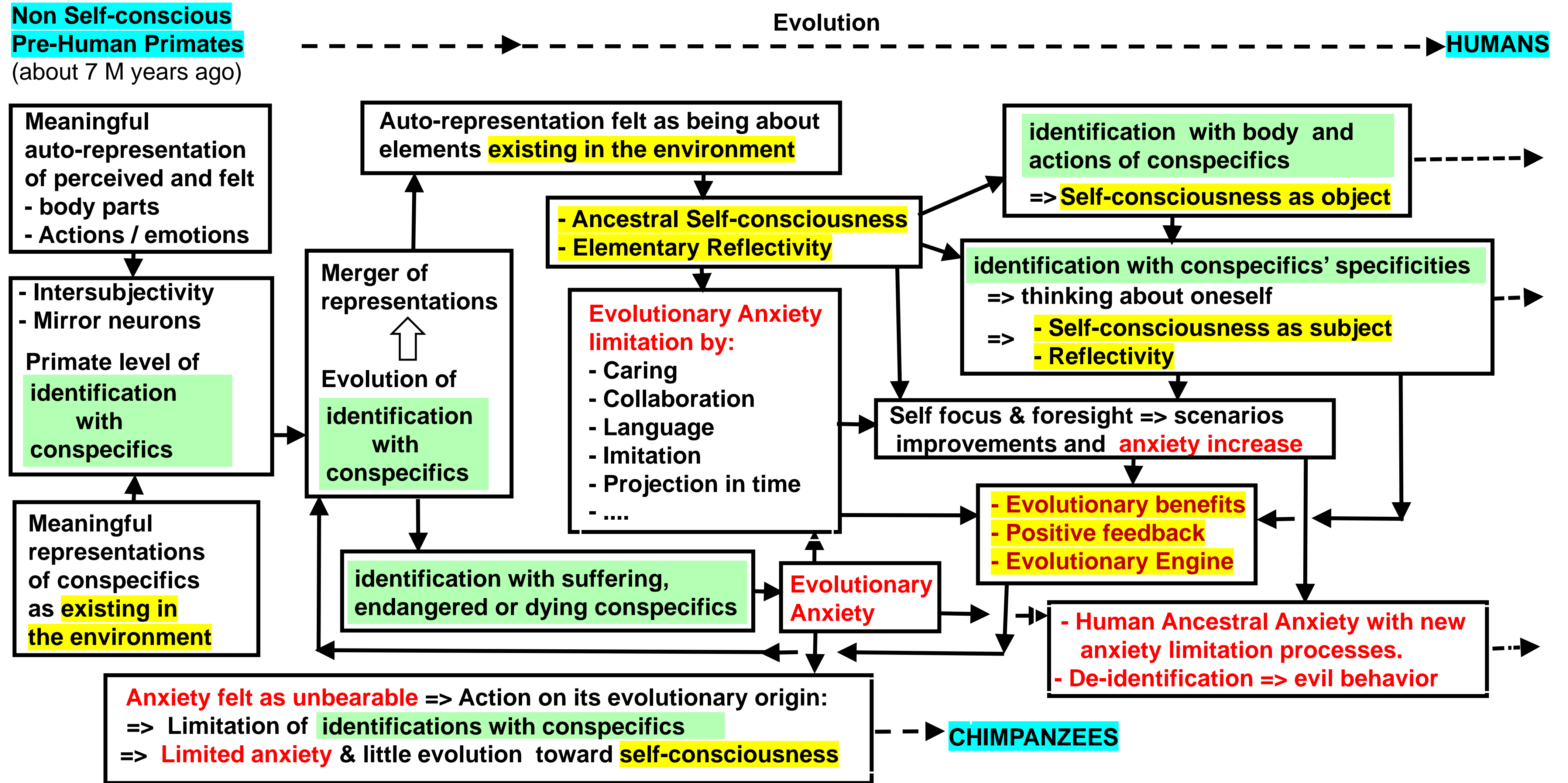
Non Self-conscious
Pre-Human Primates
(about 7 M years ago)



10) Evolutionary scenario for **HUMAN** brings in:

- Reflective self-consciousness interlaced with anxiety management.
- Evolutionary Engine considered as still active (human evolution is not finished).
- Anxiety management processes that conditions many of our conscious and unconscious mental states (much more than assumed so far).
- Evolutionary source of human evil => entry point for a possible human nature improvement (evolutionary engine still active).

* Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future *

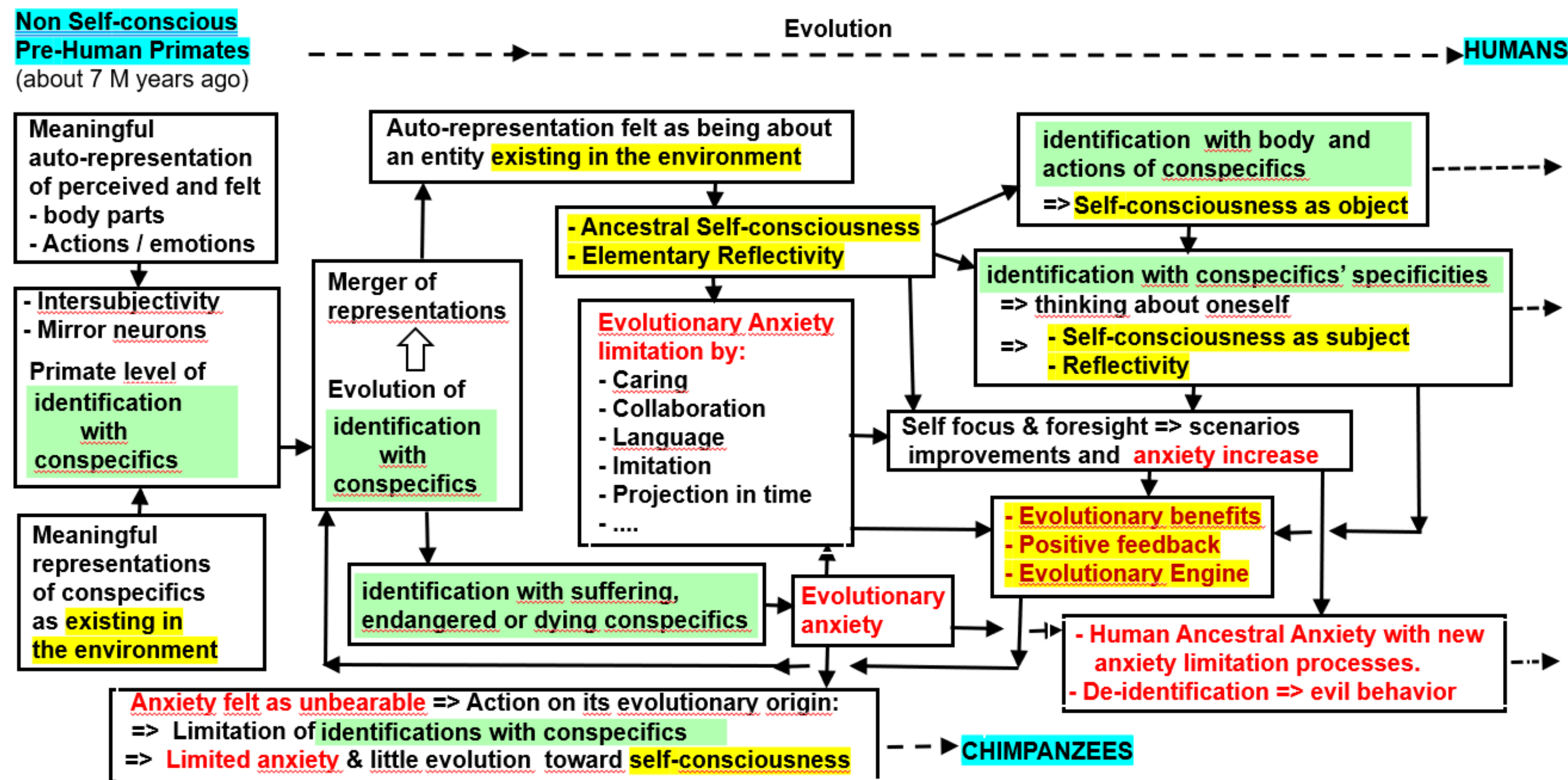


11) Suffering from evolutionary anxiety felt as unbearable => actions on its evolutionary nature and origin:

Limitation of identification with conspecifics =>

- Limitation of evolutionary anxiety, limitation of suffering.
- Limited evolution toward self-consciousness
- => **Chimpanzees.**

* Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future *



Conclusion:

- * An evolutionary scenario resulting from identifications with conspecifics at pre-human times has introduced:
 - Reflective self-consciousness interlaced with ancestral anxiety. Conditions many of our today motivations and actions.
 - Evolutionary engine sourced in self-consciousness interlaced with anxiety management. Still active today.
 - Anxiety limitation processes developed during human evolution including pleasure seeking, evil behaviors,
 - Management of anxiety limitation processes as entry point for possible improvements of human nature.
 - Rationale for pan-homo split.

Continuations:

- * Analyze evolutionary based ancestral anxiety as part of human conscious and unconscious motivations:
 - Better understanding of anxiety limitation modes => better human conscious control on unconscious anxieties.
 - Possibilities to transfer evil behavior to other anxiety limitation modes => less destructive human behavior.
- * Application to phenomenology of evil (e.g. experience and feeling in dehumanization).
- * Discuss the postulate of pre-reflective self-consciousness with the availability of an evolutionary based reflectivity.
- * Introduce an evolutionary link between self-consciousness and phenomenal consciousness. Impact on Hard Problem.

*** Self-Consciousness, Representations, Anxiety Management. Past, Present and Future ***

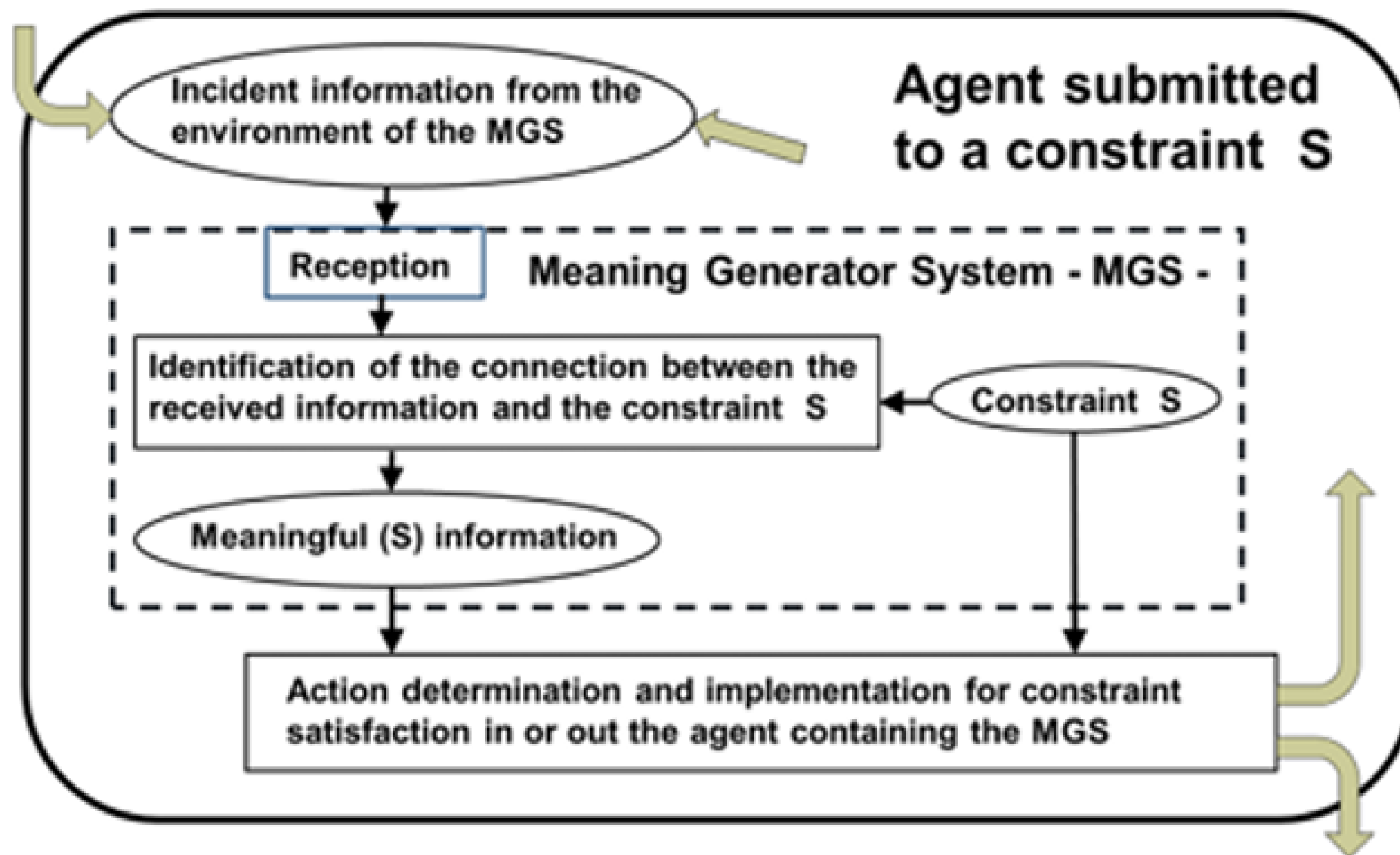
References

- (1) Leary, M, R. Buttermore, N, R. (2003). "The Evolution of the Human Self: Tracing the natural history of Self-awareness"
<https://philpapers.org/rec/LEATEO-2>
- (2) Cunningham, S. (1996). "Philosophy and the Darwinian Legacy"
<https://www.amazon.com/Philosophy-Darwinian-Legacy-Suzanne-Cunningham/dp/1878822616>
- (3) Carruthers, P. and al. (2012). "Evolving Self-Consciousness" [carruthers-evolving-self-consciousness-copy.pdf \(wordpress.com\)](#)
- (4) Menant, C. (2018). "Proposal for an evolutionary nature of self-consciousness linked to a human specific anxiety"
<https://philpapers.org/rec/MENPFA-4>
- (5) Menant, C. (2020). "Introduction to a Systemic Theory of Meaning" <https://philpapers.org/rec/MENITA-7>
- (6) Menant, C. (2011). "Computation on Information, Meaning and Representations. An Evolutionary Approach"
- Book chapter: <https://philpapers.org/rec/MENCOI> - Book: <http://www.worldscientific.com/worldscibooks/10.1142/7637>
- (7) Gallagher, S. and Zahavi, D. (2019). "Phenomenological Approaches to Self-Consciousness"
[Phenomenological Approaches to Self-Consciousness \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)
- (8) Menant, C. (2005). FIS 2005. "Information and meaning in life, humans and robots" <https://philpapers.org/rec/MENIAM>
- (9) Menant C. (2018). ASSC22. "Self-consciousness and human evil. Proposal for an evolutionary approach"
<https://philpapers.org/rec/MENSAH>
- (10) Menant C. (2021). ASSC24. "Reflectivity as part of an evolutionary scenario for Self-consciousness. Impact on Pre-reflective Self-consciousness" <https://philpapers.org/rec/MENRAA-4>
- (11) Menant C. (2014). TSC2014. "Consciousness of oneself as object and as subject. Proposal for an evolutionary approach"
<https://philpapers.org/rec/MENCOO>

Thank you for your attention

Back up 1: Meaning Generator System. Meaningful information. Meaningful representation

(<https://philpapers.org/rec/MENITA-7>, <https://philpapers.org/rec/MENCOI>)



Animal constraints :

- Stay alive
(individual & species)
- Live group life

Human constraints:

- Limit anxiety
- Look for happiness
- Avoid pain. Pleasure seeking
- Valorize ego,

Artificial Agent constraints:

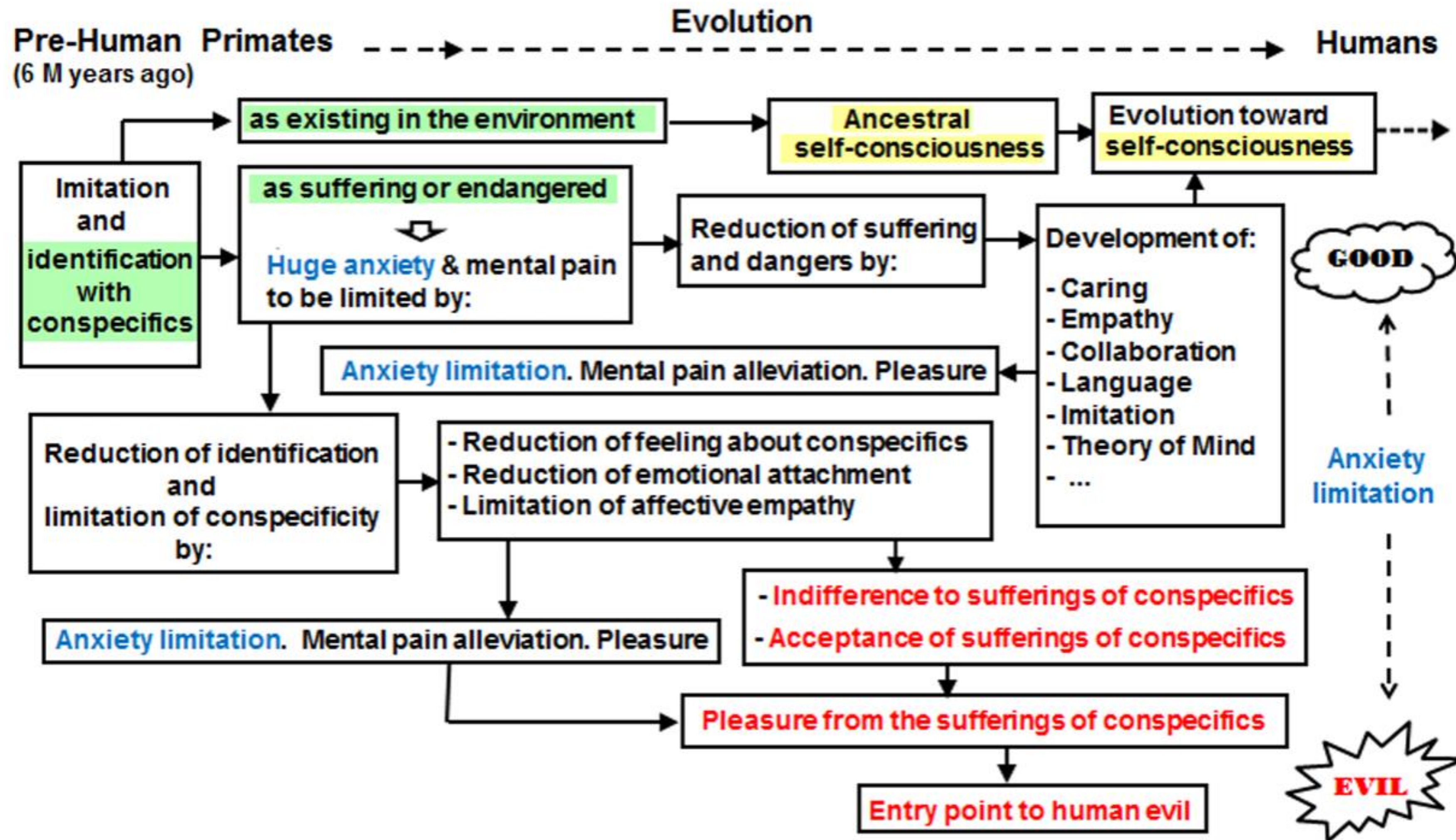
- As programmed
(derived constraints)

- * A **meaning** is **meaningful information** generated by a system submitted to a constraint when it receives an external information that has a connection with the constraint.
- * The **meaning** is formed of the connection existing between the received information and the constraint of the system.
- * The function of the **meaning** is to participate to the determination of an action that will be implemented in order to satisfy the constraint of the system.
- * **Meanings** do not exist by themselves. **Meanings** are created and used by agents submitted to constraints. The MGS is a building block for higher-level systems (agents):
- * Actions implementations can be of different types (physical, biological, mental, conscious, unconscious, data processing, ..). Actions can be external or internal to the agent.
- * A **meaningful representation** of an entity for an agent submitted to constraints is the network of meanings relative to that entity for the agent.
- * A **meaningful representation** is generated by an agent in order to maintain its nature in its environment by the satisfaction of its constraints.
- * A **meaningful representation** contains the **meaningful information** that dynamically links the agent to its environment. It includes the dynamic aspect of meaning generation with the consequences of implemented actions, as well as the action scenarios with past experiences or simulations making available anticipation performances.
- * **Meaningful representations** exist by and for the agent and embed it in its environment.

**** ASSC 22 - Krakow June 26-29 2018 ****

“Self-consciousness and human evil. Proposal for an evolutionary approach”

Christophe Menant-Bordeaux-France



Back up 3: Pre-Reflective Self-Consciousness

To explain self-consciousness, then, reflection does not suffice: we must **postulate a *sui generis* form of self-consciousness, different in kind from reflective object-consciousness.** The adjective “pre-reflective” indicates this special type of self-consciousness

<https://critique-of-pure-interest.blogspot.com/search/label/Prereflective%20self-consciousness>

“For the phenomenologists, this **immediate and first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena** must be accounted for in terms of a **pre-reflective self-consciousness**. ...

the **pre-reflective self-consciousness** which is present whenever I am living through or undergoing an experience, (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-consciousness-phenomenological/>)

pre-reflexive self-consciousness is fundamental, in the sense that it **is the foundation of any other form of consciousness.**

<https://philpapers.org/rec/LEGTOC>

Back up 4: Identification with others

* By **identification**, we mean the process by which **an individual understands that others are beings like herself.**

*to **identify with others** and thus **share subjectivities**

* allows to “place oneself in the shoes of others”, **to engage in joint intentionality.**

*Like others are perceived and felt as existing in the environment, the subject progressively feels her own entity as also existing in the environment