Homer Returns

A response to Kristina Musholt's commentary on the Concept Possession Hypothesis of Self-Consciousness.

Stef Savanah, 2nd Consciousness Online Conference, Feb 2010

I. Introduction

I thank Kristina for her feedback on my conference paper. Kristina raises several worries, each of which I briefly summarise and address in this response.

II. The Centrality of Agency

Kristina acknowledges the importance of the notion of agency for self-consciousness but questions whether it should be considered central. In the full-length version of my paper (i.e. a thesis chapter) I devote a section to this issue, only the merest sketch of which I present here.

Since I want to understand the meaning of self-consciousness in terms of awareness of the self *as a self*, a pertinent question is what is meant by a self? I have identified five distinct conceptions of self in the work of, for example, Mitchell [1994]; Allport [1948] and Neisser [1988]. These are the *Physically Extended Self*, the *Temporally Extended Self*, the *Social Self,* the *Agentive Self*, and the *Metacognitive Self*. In my analysis of these I concluded that it is just the latter two together which form a fundamental notion of self in the existential sense. By this I mean that awareness of the self as an Agentive/Metacognitive Self counts as awareness of the self *as such* at the most fundamental level. The others either depend on this fundamental awareness of the self (Temporally Extended Self and Social Self) or represent a more primitive awareness of self (Physically Extended Self).

The *Agentive Self* and *Metacognitive Self* are inseparable. To be aware of oneself as an agent implies awareness of one's metacognition, and vice versa. An organism that understands itself to be an agent has control over its own immediate intentions to act, implying the application of metacognition. Also, knowingly performing metacognitive acts of monitoring and controlling one's own cognition is the deliberate action of an agent. I do not say that an agent must be metacognitive; all organisms are agents in the sense that they are capable of performing actions. But if an agent is *aware* of its own agency then it is metacognitive. An agent that is aware of its own agency is an intentional agent, capable of knowingly monitoring and controlling its actions.

III. Intelligence and Self-Consciousness

Kristina wants to hear a little more about how exactly the connection between intelligence and Self-consciousness is to be understood, and about what exactly I mean by "intelligence". A simple but effective enough conception is to view intelligence broadly as flexibility of behaviour, to be contrasted with stimulus-response type behaviour. The main characteristic is control over behaviour – being able to choose an action, to *deliberate*. Viewed this way, we can see even from everyday speech the intuitive link between intelligence and self-consciousness. We often use the terms 'deliberate' and 'conscious' synonymously (where it is implicit by context that

'conscious' means 'self-conscious'): "I didn't do it consciously" means "I didn't do it deliberately." When someone uses that expression they mean they didn't exercise conscious control over their actions – rather, they reacted 'automatically', which is to say they responded (unthinkingly) to a stimulus. This is another example of the background thinking grounding my intuition. To answer Kristina's question about explanatory direction: yes, I do think that all *truly* intelligent organisms are self-aware.

IV. Mental Representations and Concepts

According to Kristina, the claim that Level 2 organisms have mental representations seems to imply that they are capable of intentional behaviour (that is to say behaviour that goes beyond stimulus-response reactions). I do not think that this is necessarily the case; I can imagine cases where mental representations lead to actions that are not intentional. For example, a person might react to the sight of violence involuntarily with vomiting. A sight (or, 'visual image') is one example of a mental representation. Thinking of a melody might make one weep, even before realising that the cause of the sadness was a memory associated with the tune. This is mental representation of an auditory kind. If this is the case for humans it is conceivable that for some animals *only* stimulus-response actions are triggered by mental representations.

To be conscious at all, an organism must have a mind in the sense we usually use that term – that is, something not too dissimilar to a human mind. A Venus Fly Trap in all likelihood does not have a mind, and probably neither do bacteria. But all mammals have recognisably mind-generating organs (brains). Virtually all mammals (for example) have eyes and the brain machinery to process visual information, so most likely they are capable of entertaining visual images, which, again is one example of mental representations. This could be wrong; perhaps only humans have mental representations and animals process visual nerve signals without an associated mental representation. But I strongly suspect there must be at least some non-human species that have visual images in much the same way as do humans.

But if the above analysis is incorrect, and there really is no 'level 2' (i.e. there are only what I have described as level 1 organisms (effectively stimulus/response automatons) and level 3 (self-conscious and intelligent organisms) – which is pretty much the claim made by Dickinson & Balleine [2000] for example - this would not invalidate my central thesis. I could claim that the level 1 organisms are not self-conscious because they do not have mental representations and therefore cannot hold concepts, while the higher level organisms are self-conscious because they do have mental representations and so *must* hold concepts. This would be the case if I accepted that mental representations necessarily imply concept possession. However, like Bermũdez, I argue that nonconceptual mental representations are possible.

V. What Behaviour Indicates Concept Possession?

Kristina suggests that it would be very helpful to know what kind of behaviour in particular I would admit as providing sufficient evidence for concept possession. I think it will be incumbent on the researcher to argue her case in respect of evidence for concept possession, since we can only gather indirect evidence of this capacity in experimental subjects. Nevertheless, there ought to be fairly clear cut cases where certain behaviours could not occur in the absence of conceptualisation. I have two papers currently in preparation in which I argue that the behaviour

of the experimental subjects implies concept possession. Without giving away the entire plot, they are briefly as follows:

(i) Mirror Self-Recognition (MSR). I argue that concept possession is required for symbolic thought and that MSR is effectively a demonstration of symbolic thought. If so, and if the CP Hypothesis is correct, then MSR is sufficient evidence of self-awareness.

(ii) Selective Imitation. I argue that certain types of imitative behaviour (where a deliberate choice to imitate only certain behaviours has been taken) requires inferential reasoning, which itself depends on concept possession. Again, coupled with the CP Hypothesis this indicates self-awareness.

VI. Perception Does Not Imply Conception

Kristina worries that during my analogy with perception I present a circular argument: "if my perception entails co-perception of myself, then should we not say that I am conscious of myself insofar as I perceive myself? Stephane thinks that the fact that perceptual awareness can be nonconceptual excludes this possibility, for he takes self-consciousness to be conceptual. But as this is a claim that needs to be established in the first place, he cannot use it in his argument here."

Well, I *do* claim that perception of the self does not imply self-consciousness, but *not* on the basis that this perception is non-conceptual. I claim that perception of the self can be of the same sort as perception of other objects in the environment. This type of 'perceptual consciousness' (or 'consciousness *of*') does not constitute self-consciousness as I articulated it – that is, consciousness of the self *as a self*, in the existential sense. What I am trying to establish is the relationship between conceptual abilities and *existential* self-consciousness, not perceptual awareness.

VII. Intentional and Non-Intentional Agency

Kristina questions the validity of my 'web of concepts' discussion based on the objection that in my example of the apprehension of beauty, this action is not intentional. Furthermore, Kristina provides other examples of concepts that do not seem to require the involvement of the concept of an action (such as abstract objects, possible worlds, etc).

Kristina is right that the apprehension of beauty need not be an intentional action but rather something that 'happens' to you. But my argument does not rely on *intentional* agency at this point. 'Agent' can be used just to mean a 'doer' or 'actor' – an organism that can perform actions. At least some animals are likely to be agents (doers) yet not intentional agents. That is, they react to environmental cues in a stimulus/response mode of behaviour.

If our caveman, Homer, has a concept of BEAUTY or FEAR, then I claim that he must have a concept of AGENT, for he must be able to associate BEAUTY and FEAR (or any of the logico-mathematical concepts such as '=') with an agent - presumably, a living organism. Homer, if he truly has a concept of FEAR (i.e. he understands what FEAR is) will know that what feels fear can

only be an agent. If Homer was to attribute FEAR to a rock then we'd have to assume he doesn't really have a concept of FEAR. Similarly, if Homer really had a concept of '=' he is not likely to attribute the usage of that concept to a rock. Now, the agents that Homer attributes a concept to need not themselves be concept-bearing and also need not be intentional agents. The apprehension of beauty might not be an *intentional* action, but Homer still knows that it must be an agent that does the apprehending (or that has the feeling of fear or thoughts about abstract objects, possible worlds and mathematical constructs).

If Homer has the concept of AGENT, then as argued in the paper he must know that *he himself* is an agent. But I have made a distinction between *agency* and *intentional agency*, and in my paper I said "a self-conscious organism must have a concept of its own existence as an *intentional* agent." So, the question that must be answered is: does Homer know he is an *intentional* agent? The answer, I assert, is yes. If he is an intentional agent then he must know that he is – that is, he must know that he has control over his actions (or, at least a certain amount of control). Else, he would not be able to exercise that control (in which case he could not be said to be an intentional agent). So, while Homer may not know if other agents he perceives are acting intentionally, he must know that he himself is an intentional agent if indeed he is one.

Finally, we still need to establish that Homer is indeed an *intentional* agent. Our starting point was to assume that Homer is concept-bearing, so the question is whether it is possible to be a concept-bearing agent yet not an intentional agent. Concept possession confers the power of inferential reasoning (which is one reason I think it sits at the core of intelligent behaviour). With inferential reasoning an organism can make a choice, that is, can deliberate. Being able to make a choice means the ability to act intentionally. So Homer, being concept-bearing (per premise) is an intentional agent.

References

Allport, Gordon W (1948), 'The Ego in Contemporary Psychology', *Psychological Review*, 50: 451-478

Dickenson, A & Balleine, B W (2000) *Causal Cognition and Goal-Directed Action* in Heyes & Huber, pp185-204

Heyes, Cecelia, & Huber, Ludwig (Eds.) (2000), *The Evolution of Cognition*, A Bradford Book, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. & London, England

Mitchell, R. W (1994), *Multiplicities of Self*, in Parker, Mitchell & Boccia, pp166-186

Neisser, Ulric (1988), 'Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge', *Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 35-59