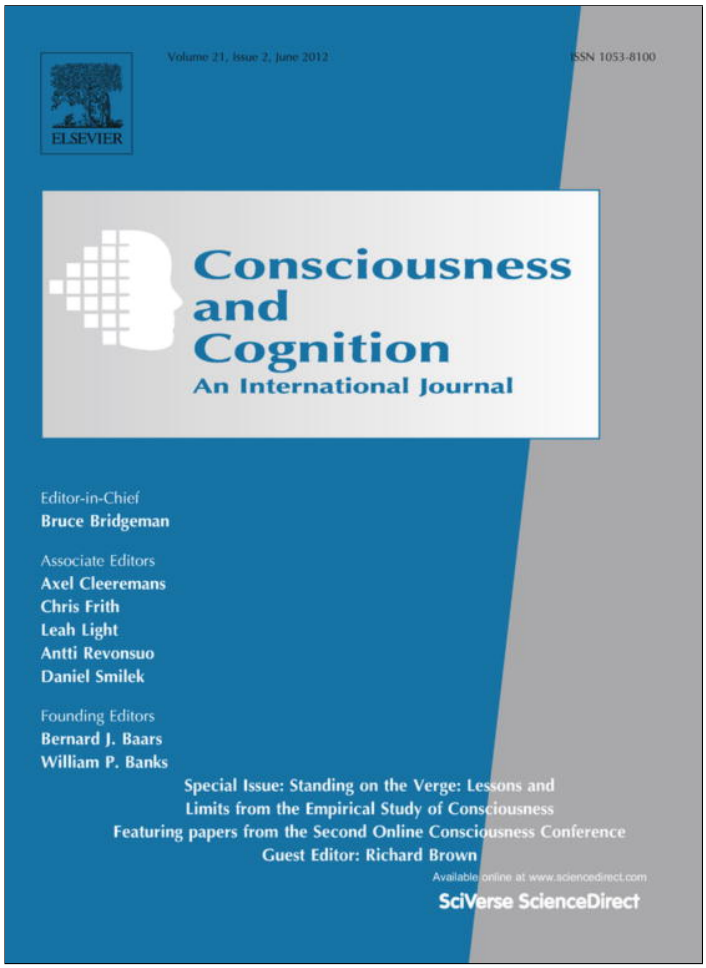

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Commentary

Concepts or metacognition – What is the issue? Commentary on Stephane Savanah's "The concept possession hypothesis of self-consciousness" ☆

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ABSTRACT

The author claims that concept possession is not only necessary but also sufficient for self-consciousness, where self-consciousness is understood as the awareness of oneself as a self. Further, he links concept possession to intelligent behavior. His ultimate aim is to provide a framework for the study of self-consciousness in infants and non-human animals. I argue that the claim that all concepts are necessarily related to the self-concept remains unconvincing and suggest that what might be at issue here are not so much conceptual but rather metacognitive abilities.

The central argument of the target paper is supposed to show that every concept is necessarily related to the self-concept (in analogy to perception, which, according to Gibsonian theories of perception, necessarily contains self-related information). In other words, according to the author, the self-concept can be seen as the "primary concept" (Savanah, 2012, p. 713–720). This is a surprising claim, as I take the self-concept to be a rather complex concept, which requires the ability to ascribe various mental and bodily properties to oneself (and to contrast these with those of others), and it is hard to see how its acquisition could precede the acquisition of all other concepts.

Savanah (in press) argues that all concepts are necessarily related to the concept of an AGENT. Since agency, in turn, is taken to be the central characteristic of the self-concept, his argument is thereby supposed to show that every concept is necessarily related to the self-concept. While his argument might be plausible for some concepts, it is much less plausible for other concepts. Take the concept of an abstract object, or of some other philosophical concept. Do these imply the concept of an agent? If so, in what sense? Do they require someone who actually thinks of these concepts? Even if they did, it is not obvious that thoughts are intentional actions. Or what about perceptual concepts? Perhaps they imply the notion of a perceiver, but that would at best give you a concept of yourself as a perceiver, not as an agent, since it seems implausible to think of perceptions as actions. Likewise emotions – the concept of fear, for instance, might at best provide you with the concept of yourself as the bearer of that affective state, but not as an agent, for being in fear is not something that you "do". Even Savanah's own example of the concept BEAUTY remains doubtful. According to Savanah, BEAUTY needs to be apprehended, apprehension is an action (which requires an agent), and hence the concept of BEAUTY entails the concept of agency. But is the apprehension of beauty really a type of intentional action? Is it not rather something that "happens" to you, as in when you are struck by the beauty of a piece of music you are listening to, or by the beautiful scenery in front of you? In what sense do we have to conceive of the apprehension of beauty as a form of intentional action?[1]

☆ Commentary on Savanah, S. (2012). The concept possession hypothesis of self-consciousness. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 21, 713-720. This article is part of a special issue of this journal on Standing on the Verge: Lessons and Limits from the Empirical study of Consciousness.

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[1] However, it is not clear why one would want to restrict the notion of a self to agency in the first place. Why not instead expand the notion of a self to include the self as a perceiver and bearer of reactive attitudes, which would significantly expand the scope of relevant self-related concepts?

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Moreover, concept acquisition is presumably a gradual process. Is it really obvious (or even plausible) that in the early stages of concept acquisition, for instance when a child first learns the concept of an animal or a car, the self-concept stands at the beginning of the acquisition of the relevant concepts?

Further, although Savanah's ultimate aim is to provide a clear-cut criterion for self-consciousness, such that "where concept possession can be inferred from a subject's behavior, this may be taken as a demonstration of self-consciousness" (Savanah, in press, p. xx.), it remains unclear what the relevant criteria for concept possession might be. Several abilities are mentioned in connection with concept possession, in particular the ability to display flexible behavior, and the ability to deliberate and to monitor and control one's behavior. On Savanah's view, beings who do not possess conceptual abilities can only display stimulus–response behavior, while beings who do possess concepts are able to engage in flexible (or intelligent) behavior. But this seems to be too weak a notion of concept possession, for surely there are instances in which we would classify the behavior of an animal or infant as intentional (and hence flexible), despite not wanting to ascribe conceptual abilities to them. After all, the very fact that animals and non-linguistic infants can display intentional behavior in the absence of conceptual abilities is taken to be one of the strongest arguments in favor of *non*conceptual representational content (see, for instance, Bermudez, 1998, chap. 4).

However, the fact that Savanah puts emphasis on deliberation and behavioral control might suggest that what he really has in mind here are not so much conceptual as metacognitive abilities. Metacognition is defined as the ability to represent one's own intentional and epistemic states (or as 'thinking about one's own thinking'), thus allowing, among other things, for the monitoring and control of one's cognitive behavior. The study of metacognition has recently entered the discussion about self-consciousness in non-human animals, as paradigms that do not rely on linguistic abilities have been developed to test for this ability (for an overview and discussion see Smith, Shields, & Washburn, 2003). So if metacognition is ultimately what is at the heart of Savanah's conception of self-consciousness, it might be a promising approach to consider these paradigms (rather than taking the detour though the contested field of theories of concept possession). Of particular importance here is the study of uncertainty monitoring, which is taken to indicate that a subject is conscious of their epistemic state. Species that have been found to display this ability include dolphins (Smith et al., 1995), rhesus monkeys (Hampton, 2001), great apes (Call & Carpenter, 2001) and human infants (Call & Carpenter, 2001). However, it has also been argued that uncertainty monitoring tasks can be solved without involving meta-representations (Carruthers, 2008). Thus, the study of metacognition and its relation to self-consciousness remains controversial. Nonetheless, it is an area for important future philosophical and empirical research that is well worth exploring.

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