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# HOW PRIMITIVE IS SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS?: AUTONOMOUS NONCONCEPTUAL CONTENT AND IMMUNITY TO ERROR THROUGH MISIDENTIFICATION

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## Abstract

Traditionally, investigations into the nature of self-consciousness have focused on the peculiarities of the first-person pronoun. But can we extend the notion to non-language-using creatures as well, including pre-linguistic infants? José Luis Bermúdez has recently argued that creatures possessing no conceptual abilities whatsoever nevertheless possess states that can be considered primitive forms of self-consciousness. I discuss one such form Bermúdez gives— that of somatic proprioception— and show that it fails to satisfy the conditions he adopts for states funded by that type of perception to be representational as well as to be immune to error through misidentification. This conclusion forces a choice between abandoning either immunity to error through misidentification or a sharp conceptual/nonconceptual distinction with regard to representational states.

## Introduction

Most traditional accounts of self-consciousness have focused exclusively on the peculiarities of the first-person pronoun. To be self-conscious from this perspective is to possess the ability to make judgments employing a first-person concept, judgments canonically expressed with 'I'. But do creatures lacking linguistic abilities thereby lack self-consciousness? After all, when hungry, even lobsters are self-possessed enough to avoid eating themselves. And what of pre-linguistic infants? If they are eventually to come to entertain thoughts involving a first-person concept, how does self-consciousness for them arise out of their wordless beginnings?

Venturing away from such traditional accounts requires that we should be clear concerning what we mean when we speak of a creature as self-conscious. In general, to be self-conscious, a creature must possess states with first-person content. We need to restrict our search further, however, for first-person content comes in (at least) two flavors. Consider the following examples:

- (1) I am the winner of the New York Lottery.
- (2) RM is the winner of the New York Lottery.

Intuitively it seems that (2) does not entail (1), for I can rationally believe that (2) is true while denying the truth of (1)— I could lack a further belief that I am identical with RM. In (1), I am thinking of myself nonaccidentally, perfectly aware to whom I am ascribing the property of lottery-winner, even if I have misread the numbers on my ticket and am actually no wealthier than before. In contrast, (2) leaves open the possibility that I am thinking of myself only accidentally, ascribing a property to someone unbeknownst to me who in fact turns out to be myself. Naturally, for me the above cases will further differ radically in the amount of joy expressed at their tokening. But the crucial distinction between the two illustrates the cardinal feature of self-consciousness: For a creature to be self-conscious it must be capable of possessing states that, like (1), have nonaccidental first-person content.

Can creatures lacking any conceptual resources whatsoever possess states that capture the distinction between (1) and (2), or at least approximate the nonaccidental nature of (1)? José Luis Bermúdez has offered an affirmative answer to this question, arguing at length in *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness* that certain forms of autonomous nonconceptual content— states with which a creature represents the world as being such-and-such a way despite possessing no conceptual resources whatsoever— can be considered forms of genuine self-consciousness.<sup>1</sup> We have good initial reason to agree with Bermúdez: Extending the range of types or forms of content that can correctly be characterized as genuinely first-personal gives us a hope of dispelling the mystery of how the richer,

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<sup>1</sup> Bermúdez is motivated to look for nonconceptual content that is genuinely first-personal to escape what he calls the paradox of self-consciousness. This paradox is roughly that analyzing self-conscious thought solely in terms of a subject's mastering the first-person pronoun will rely upon the notion of him thinking of himself as the author of the thought. Spelling out the "he himself" condition requires reference to the first-person pronoun, and we thus fall prey to circularity. Whether one finds Bermúdez's paradox compelling, it is an interesting question in its own right as to whether creatures lacking conceptual resources should be thought of as self-conscious and if so on what grounds.

conceptual forms of self-consciousness actually arise in the normal course of human psychological development.

In what follows we will consider one source of perceptual contents—namely somatic proprioception—that Bermúdez believes gives rise to genuine, albeit primitive, forms of self-consciousness. We will find, however, that a widely accepted condition that must be met for a state to be considered nonaccidentally first-personal stands at odds with certain nonconceptual states' being representational. In light of the incongruity, we face a choice between rejecting that condition, that nonaccidental first-person states be immune to error through misidentification, or accepting that a clear distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual states cannot be maintained.

### Autonomous Nonconceptual Content

Elucidating exactly what nonconceptual content in general amounts to is a difficult task. Bermúdez himself is interested in establishing the existence of states with autonomous nonconceptual content to fend off circularity in a certain explanation of nonaccidental first-person thought. Though one can dispute his charge of circularity, his overall approach to primitive self-consciousness is instructive. He motivates the theoretical necessity of nonconceptual representational states via inference to the best explanation. Arguing on a broadly functionalist line, Bermúdez contends that no account of the behavior of an intentional system can be given without reference to representational states. However, certain intentional systems—including non-linguistic animals and pre-linguistic infants—lack concepts, yet still succeed, for example, in navigating their environment. We know that such creatures are representing their surroundings (and the states of their bodies) because no law-like relation holds between sensory input and behavioral output. Differences in behavior when faced with the same sensory input indicate that a creature is possibly misrepresenting a current state of the world or perhaps that its behavior is a function of a complex group of states, some of which differ from a previous occasion (a past predator can become prey, e.g.). Once general room has been made for states with autonomous nonconceptual content, Bermúdez goes to great lengths to provide specific examples of nonconceptual contents that qualify as primitive forms of self-consciousness.

One such example Bermúdez gives is that of somatic proprioception.<sup>2</sup> One's proprioceptive system provides a stream of information regarding the state of one's body, the position of limbs, skin and joint tension,

<sup>2</sup> For a fairly extensive summary of the informational systems that constitute somatic proprioception, see the general introduction to Bermúdez, Marcel, & Eilan (1995).

bodily feedback during motion, etc. These states are representational states because they, like any other representational state, "serve as intermediaries between sensory input and behavioral output" (Bermúdez, 1998). Granting for the moment that such states are both representational and autonomously nonconceptual, how are we to determine if they qualify as forms of primitive self-consciousness? Bermúdez offers that such states must meet the two core requirements for any self-conscious thought: They must have immediate implications for action,<sup>3</sup> and they must be nonaccidentally about oneself. Skipping the former for the moment, thoughts are nonaccidentally about oneself, Bermúdez and many others argue, because they are immune to error through misidentification relative to the first-person pronoun. To assess the claim such states have to self-consciousness with any accuracy, we must briefly review what this condition amounts to more generally.

### Immunity to Error Through Misidentification

In *The Blue Book* Wittgenstein (1958) distinguishes between what he calls 'I' used as subject and 'I' used as object. The latter, he claims, permits the possibility of misidentifying the referent of the first-person pronoun, whereas the former does not.<sup>4</sup> When uttering 'I am in pain'—the canonical instance of 'I' used as subject—Wittgenstein offers that the identification of the speaker is not in question: I cannot ascribe a felt pain to someone who, unbeknownst to me, is actually myself. In a genuinely self-conscious ascription of a property, it is no accident that I recognize that I am the subject of the ascription, for it could not be otherwise. In Wittgenstein's memorable phrase: "The man who cries out with pain, or says that he has pain, doesn't choose the mouth which says it" (Wittgenstein, 1958, emphasis his).

Sydney Shoemaker has done much work to elucidate and to extend this condition, labeling it with the now standard terminology "immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first-person pronoun" (Shoemaker, 1968).<sup>5</sup> For Shoemaker, roughly as for

<sup>3</sup> For a characterization of this requirement see Perry (1979).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Wittgenstein claims that 'I' in cases of its use as subject is not a referring expression at all. This position is endorsed and quite forcefully defended by Anscombe (1975).

<sup>5</sup> Shoemaker (1968) basically accepts Wittgenstein's distinction tout court, though he does hold that instances of 'I' in judgments immune to error through misidentification do genuinely refer. In recent work, Shoemaker (1994) has adopted Gareth Evans's (1982) coinage for this immunity, calling such judgments "identification free". The argument that follows does not depend on favoring a particular terminology, and therefore I will use the original phrase to avoid possible confusion. For a recent exploration of the kinds

Wittgenstein, a certain class of judgments permit error in the predicate position but do not leave the identity of the subject of the predication in question, for knowing in a particular way that a property is instantiated simply obviates the need for identifying its source. Bermúdez rightly points out, as Gareth Evans did before him, that these contents are immune to error through misidentification in virtue of the "evidence base from which they are derived, or the information on which they are based" (Bermúdez, 1998), not in virtue of any particular predicate or predicates. Ascriptions of pain to myself as well as to others employ the same predicate; the claim is that immunity issues from the way in which I know a pain to be present.<sup>6</sup> Fundamentally, Bermúdez—like nearly all other participants in this dialectic—accepts that contents cannot be considered genuinely self-conscious unless they possess this type of immunity.<sup>7</sup>

Somatic proprioception provides just such an evidence base, argues Bermúdez, for "somatic proprioception cannot give rise to thoughts that are accidentally about oneself" (Bermúdez, 1998). He writes:

One of the distinctive features of somatic proprioception is that it is subserved by information channels that do not yield information about anybody's bodily properties except my own (just as introspection does not yield information about anybody's psychological properties except my own). It follows from the simple fact that I somatically proprioceive particular bodily properties and introspect particular psychological properties that those bodily and psychological properties are my own. (Bermúdez, 1998)

Focusing just on the particular bodily properties reported on by proprioception, how are we to assess the claim that I cannot be mistaken about within whose body those properties are instantiated when perceived in that way? For somatic proprioception to be a source of genuine self-consciousness, it must serve as an evidence base for contents where the subject cannot be in doubt, even for creatures lacking any conceptual resources whatsoever. Yet to qualify as

representational—that is, to be considered contentful at all—thoughts funded by proprioception must allow for the possibility of misrepresentation. Misidentification is but a special case of misrepresentation, and hence endorsing immunity to error through misidentification at this primitive level precludes misrepresentation, which apparently serves to disqualify proprioceptive states from being representational.

To put the point another way, how can states funded by proprioception misrepresent? States in general can only "who" or "what" misrepresent—viz., they can misrepresent the subject of the state ("who") or the presence of a property ("what"), or presumably both. Misrepresentation of the "who" variety amounts to misidentification. To have "what" without "who" misrepresentation requires some representation of the subject with which a mistaken ascription can be made. Since nonconceptual states lack subject-predicate structure, no such representation of the subject is available in that case. Hence, to "what" misrepresent is to misidentify.

Unlike those who discuss immunity to misidentification as it relates to judgments, it is not at all clear that proponents of nonaccidental nonconceptual content have the philosophical machinery to relieve this tension. Evans, for example, does not fall into a similar predicament, for his 'I'-thoughts possess a conceptual structure that localizes—as Shoemaker's condition in its long form indicates—the immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first person pronoun. Misrepresentation can still occur with regard to the predicate position and the ascription of bodily properties, and hence immunity to misidentification and misrepresentation can co-exist in the same thought or judgment. Non-language-using creatures, of course, do not have the first-person pronoun at their disposal. Without conceptually structured thoughts, it seems that these types of subjects cannot possess contents that are both representational and immune to error through misidentification, for they have nothing that that immunity could be relative to.

Or do they? Bermúdez argues that inference to the best explanation warrants ascribing "protobeliefs", or nonconceptual belief analogs, to non-language-using creatures requiring intentional explanations to account for their behavior. As he presents them, perceptual protobeliefs<sup>8</sup> are nearly as rich as their conceptual correlates: they can embody "nonextensional modes of presentation" in terms of Gibsonian affordances, and they are somewhat compositional, though they do not allow for "global recombability", failing to meet

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of immunity, including fundamental ways in which Evans and Shoemaker disagree, see Pryor (1999).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Evans (1982). Bermúdez also argues, persuasively I think, that Shoemaker's elucidation of immunity to error through misidentification should be stated in terms of justification as opposed to knowledge. For if one can still be mistaken about the instantiation of a predicate—even if one cannot be mistaken about the first-person identification in that case—that belief cannot be considered knowledge. It remains a question whether for Shoemaker this is possible.

<sup>7</sup> John Campbell (1999), for example, has recently remarked that "immunity to error through misidentification is a datum" that can be used to test the viability of various theoretical approaches to the first person.

<sup>8</sup> Bermúdez (1998) also briefly discusses instrumental protobeliefs, but our discussion can safely ignore them. Bermúdez draws this bit of his theoretical apparatus from Peacocke (1992).

Evans's Generality Constraint (Bermúdez, 1998; Evans, 1982). So structured, perceptual protobeliefs support primitive inference and the limited generation of further new nonconceptual contents from a set of others. Accordingly, perceptual protobeliefs so construed—including contents based on somatic proprioception—seem capable of supporting something like a discrete subject component, analogous to an 'I'-idea, that could serve as the locus of immunity to error through misidentification, as well as a predicative component that could misrepresent a property of the world or body.

One certainly becomes puzzled at this point, however. If nonconceptual contents based upon somatic proprioception can support both a component immune to misidentification and a component preserving the possibility of misrepresentation, then what are we to make of the original motivation for maintaining a clear conceptual/nonconceptual distinction with regard to contents? Indeed, it seems that inference to the best explanation warrants thinking of the constituents of protobeliefs as "protoconcepts". Much like concepts, protoconcepts could be defined in terms of their inferential role, where a protoconcept's inferential role can be cashed out in terms of the protopropositions or protobeliefs in which it features. As the analogy deepens between concepts and protoconcepts, we seem to have less reason to conclude that creatures lacking language likewise lack conceptual abilities of any sort, however limited or nascent. After all, the set of protopropositions may be quite limited for non-language using creatures, but they nevertheless succeed in satisfying two subtle and sophisticated philosophical criteria. Perhaps that success itself provides compelling evidence of some degree of concept possession.

Bermúdez himself would no doubt resist this approach since it seems to run afoul of what he calls the Priority Principle:

The Priority Principle: Conceptual abilities are constitutively linked with linguistic abilities in such a way that conceptual abilities cannot be possessed by nonlinguistic creatures. (Bermúdez, 1998)

Priority was initially important because it "allows us to make a very clear distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual modes of content-bearing representation" (Bermúdez, 1998), and hence provides us with a means of explaining, for example, how conceptual forms of self-consciousness can arise over the course of normal human psychological development. Yet, given that protobeliefs are in some measure compositional and fund limited inference—indeed are constituted by protoconcepts— it is no longer clear how we can maintain a very clear distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual contents.

Still, perhaps the protoconcept/concept analogy runs fairly shallow, for even if non-language-using creatures

possessed a range of protoconcepts defined in terms of protoconceptual roles, they do not have an explicit grasp of these roles. Such creatures are merely sensitive to the truth of inferential transitions. Bermúdez (1998) writes:

Certainly, it is possible to be justified (or warranted) in making a certain inferential transition without being able to provide a justification (or warrant) for that inferential transition. It is a familiar epistemological point, after all, that there is a difference between being justified in holding a belief and justifying that belief. What does not seem to be true is that one can be justified in making an inferential transition even if one is not capable of providing any justifications at all for any inferential transitions. But providing justifications is a paradigmatically linguistic activity. Providing justifications is a matter of identifying and articulating the reasons for a given classification, inference, or judgment. It is because prelinguistic creatures are in principle incapable of providing such justifications that the priority thesis is true. Mere sensitivity to the truth of inferential transitions involving a given concept is not enough for possession of that concept. Rational sensitivity is required, and rational sensitivity comes only with language mastery.

For Bermúdez, then, possessing and deploying concepts demands a fairly advanced capacity to identify and to provide reasons for beliefs, and limited inferential ability—even an ability to make inferences that one is justified in making—does not indicate concept possession.

This seems a bit too stringent, however. Being able to give reasons as reasons is a function of possessing the concepts of justification, belief, and reason, among others. Imposing the further requirement on inferential ability that one recognize that one is in fact giving reasons may disqualify attributing conceptual abilities where we normally would be comfortable doing so. To take an example Bermúdez himself gives, the children in Susan Carey's experiments who concluded that a worm was more likely to have a spleen than a toy mechanical monkey are probably not in position to identify their reasons for this conclusion as reasons and to answer a call to justify their inferences. Still, he wants to credit these four-year olds with possessing the concepts HUMAN BEING, LIVING ANIMAL, INTERNAL ORGANS, and the inferential relations between them.

## Conclusion

It seems that maintaining that nonconceptual contents be immune to error through misidentification entails that a sharp distinction between conceptual and nonconceptual contents must be abandoned. Perhaps we can spare a fairly strong distinction by instead abandoning the requirement that these contents be immune to error through misidentification. That is, we accept that protobeliefs are only minimally structured,

ultimately lacking the propositional precision required to support the weight of an immunity claim. It's not clear to me that we sacrifice much explanatory power in making this move, since we can still hold firmly to the second core condition for genuine self-conscious thought—namely, that nonconceptual proprioceptive contents must have immediate implications for action, which in fact they do (Bermúdez, 1998). Moreover, in preserving this second condition we still have a means of determining the class of nonconceptual contents that qualify as a form of genuine primitive self-consciousness. Alternatively, we can retain immunity to error as a necessary condition of self-consciousness, relinquishing instead the Priority Principle and the sharp conceptual/nonconceptual division that it was intended to capture. Choosing this route has interesting implications, for in doing so we greatly expand the range of creatures that can be said to possess conceptual capacities of one sort or another—including, evidently, those possessing some form of self concept.

Whatever route we choose, something, it seems, must be surrendered. For despite what doubts we might harbor concerning the lowly lobster, higher animals and our own infants should give us pause. Self-consciousness is certainly not ours alone; we just have yet to understand it in its more primitive forms.

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