

Self-Concepts: Primitive and Robust

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Abstract:

Starting from Dretske's notion of harnessing information, I made a distinction between primitive and robust concepts of one's self. Primitive self-concepts are simply a matter of keeping track, through memory of information attained through normally self-informative states, like perception and interoception, about oneself. This is all that lots of animals seems to have. Namely, they have ways of picking up information about other animals of their species. A hen keeps track of the various animals in the barnyard and treats them differently based on her experience. She flees from mean roosters, but not from docile chickens. For this she seems to need an idea or something like an idea of the various animals, tied to ideas of their various properties. But some animals pass the mirror test. They are "self-aware". This means they can pick up information about themselves in the way they pick up information about other animals. So, they need a robust self-concept. We humans have robust concepts of ourselves, adding all sorts of information about ourselves attained in the same way we gain information about others. But we still rely on the underlying primitive concepts. Examples: George W. Bush ducking a shoe thrown at him, any of us grabbing a mug of beer in front of us, or, for that matter, Descartes writing his *Meditations*.