

Handout for
USES OF ‘I’
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Introduction

General thesis of this lecture: our uses of ‘I’ in language and in thought depend on two different kinds of self-awareness: awareness of one’s embodied existence; and awareness of being engaged in rationally connecting the contents of one’s mental states.

Fundamental reference rule for ‘I’: ‘I’ refers, in any instance of its use, to the author of the thought or the speaker of the sentence in the content of which ‘I’ is a component.

The ‘I’-user need not have a concept of the reference rule. Nor is the reference rule sufficient to account for what is specific to using ‘I’ rather than any other singular referring expression. But keeping in view the fundamental reference rule is important for the argument of this lecture.

I- Recent analyses of uses of ‘I’.

I-1. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Blue Book* distinction between use of ‘I’ “as subject” and use of ‘I’ “as object.” In uses of ‘I’ as object, there is room for a kind of mistake for which there is no room in uses of ‘I’ as subject.

T1: “*There is no question of recognizing a person when I say I have tooth ache. To ask ‘are you sure it’s you who have pain?’ would be nonsensical... And now this way of stating our idea suggests itself: that it is as impossible that in making the statement ‘I have toothache’ I should have mistaken another person for myself, as it is to moan with pain by mistake, having mistaken someone else for me. To say ‘I have pain’ is no more a statement about a particular person than moaning is.*”

I-2. Sydney Shoemaker’s amended version of the *Blue Book* distinction: judgments in which ‘I’ is used as subject are characterized, *not* by the fact that they are not about a particular person, but *rather* by the fact that, even while asserting a predicate to be true of a particular person, they are “immune to error through misidentification relative to the first person pronoun” (IEM).

In contrast, in uses of ‘I’ as object, knowing the predicate to be true of someone is not *ipso facto* knowing it to be true of *me*, the current thinker of the thought or speaker of the corresponding sentence “I am F.” This is because ascribing the predicate to *me*, the subject currently thinking the thought “I am F,” depends on an intermediate premise that has the form of an identity proposition: “The person that is F = I.” And I may be mistaken about that identity.

I-3. Nevertheless, even uses of ‘I’ as object are partly supported by the kind of information that, if formulated in a judgment, would be formulated in a judgment that is IEM, namely a judgment in which ‘I’ would be used as subject.

Example: John Perry’s case, “I am making a mess.”

I-4. Recognizing this point is what led Gareth Evans to devote a whole section to IEM in chapter 7 of *The Varieties of Reference*, “Self-Identification.”

T2: “*The bearing of the relevant information on our I-thoughts is constitutive of our having an I-Idea.*” (Evans)

I-5: Moreover, Evans insists (rightly) that the “relevant information” includes not only information concerning our psychological states but also information concerning our physical states: the states, positions and motions *of our body*. In Evans’ words,

T3 The Idea we have of ourselves in using the concept ‘I’ “*spans the division between the mental and the physical.*”

This is true, says Evans, even in the case of thoughts in which *mental* predicates are attributed to ‘I’: in the self-ascription of beliefs and experiences. This is because I understand such self-ascriptions only if I understand the criteria by which others may ascribe those same states or properties to me, and if I understand under what circumstances I would ascribe those states and properties to others. Both conditions entail that I take myself to be a spatio-temporal entity distinct from other spatio-temporal entities: a person, distinct from other persons and from other kinds of physical entities in space and time.

When stating these conditions, Evans compares his position to Immanuel Kant’s.

T4: “*Without this background [the background conditions for understanding mental predicates to be applicable to other individuals, not just to oneself] we secure no genuine ‘I think’ (‘think that p’) to accompany [the subject’s] thought (‘p’). The ‘I think’ which accompanies all his thoughts remains purely formal.*”

T5: “*I believe we may have here an interpretation of Kant’s remark about the transcendental ‘I think,’ which accompanies all our perceptions (B131-32). Without the background, we have at most a formal ‘I think’; it yields nothing until embedded within a satisfactory theory.*”

I-6. My thesis: the view Evans attributes to Kant is not Kant’s view, nor is it the correct view to hold. There is for Kant a type of use of ‘I’, the use of ‘I’ in ‘I think,’ in which understanding oneself, the current ‘I’-user, to be the entity of which the predicate is asserted to be true (in this case: the predicate ‘think’) does *not* depend on consciousness of oneself as a particular person located in space and time.

I-7 Taking stock: 1) All uses of ‘I’ depend at least in part on the kind of information that would ground a use of ‘I’ as subject (I-3 and I-4). 2) That information (grounding judgments that are IEM) may include information about states of one’s own body as well as information about psychological states (I-5). 3) (*Pace* Evans and in agreement with Kant) neither self-location nor having an Idea of oneself as an embodied entity are necessary conditions for the self-ascription of the predicate “think” (I-6, to be argued in the next part).

II- Kant on consciousness of oneself as subject.

II-1. The context: Kant’s transcendental investigation into the possibility of synthetic a priori cognition and, for that purpose, Kant’s investigation into the possibility of empirical perceptual cognition.

II-2. Kant’s thesis: The proposition ‘I think’ that may come to accompany the statement of a mental content is the conceptual formulation of our consciousness of being engaged in the mental activity that may result in subsuming perceptual objects under concepts, as well as in generating proofs in mathematics or natural science.

II-3. Example: the transition from “This is a tree” to “I think this is a tree.”

II-4. Another example: the transition from “this proof is valid” to “I think this proof is valid.”

II-5. In terms of Wittgenstein’s *Blue Book* distinction, both judgments are IEM. But this is not in virtue of being based on a particular kind of experience. Rather, this is in virtue of the very nature of the process of thinking and the very meaning of the first person concept and pronoun ‘I’: ‘I’ refers in any instance of its use, to whoever or whatever is currently thinking the proposition in which ‘I’ is used.

II-6. Kant does not think of ‘I’ in terms of a theory of reference or self-reference. His central thought about ‘I’, as stated in the argument of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is that having available the concept ‘I’ is a necessary condition for combining representations in such a way that you can form general concepts, themselves combined in judgments and inferences; and that conversely, combining representations in such a way that you can form general concepts, combined in judgments and inferences, is a necessary condition for having available the concept ‘I’. This mutual conditioning is just what is expressed in the proposition “I think.” It is this mutual conditioning Kant has in view when he writes that ‘I think’ expresses a “mere formal condition of all our thoughts.” This statement is not incompatible with holding that even in the context of expressing a “mere formal condition of all our thoughts,” the concept ‘I’ represents – or, in our terms, refers to – an existing entity, the entity that thinks the thought or as Kant says: “The I, or he, or it, the thing, that thinks.” By the concept ‘I’ itself, nothing further is known. But it suffices to individuate, for the thinker of the thought, herself as the thinker of the thought.

II-7. Nevertheless, there is a grain of truth in Evans’ view. Given that we are, as a matter of fact, spatio-temporal entities, if we cannot locate our own position in space through time, then the consistency of our view of the world is in danger of collapsing, which means that our capacity to form mutually consistent judgments about the world collapses too, and so does our use of ‘I’ insofar as the latter depends on our capacity to form rationally consistent judgments. We literally lose our minds. But this does not make the concept ‘I’ itself, nor does it make our Idea of ourselves in using the concept ‘I’, depend on the particular kinds of awareness carried by self-location or by awareness of oneself as an embodied entity. Nor does it make the kind of consciousness of one’s own body that grounds judgments immune to error through misidentification relative to the first person pronoun a necessary condition of all uses of ‘I’.

II-8. Taking stock: 1) (In agreement with Kant) the thought ‘I think p’ expresses the consciousness (explicit or – mostly – implicit), of being engaged in establishing rational unity among the contents of one’s thoughts. 2) (In the terms of the distinctions laid out in part I) any judgment ‘I think p’ is IEM, for reasons unique to this type of judgment. 3) (In agreement with Kant) *Pace* Evans, neither having an Idea of oneself as embodied nor having an Idea of oneself as located in space are necessary conditions for meaningfully referring to oneself by the concept ‘I’ in ‘I think.’ 4) Nevertheless, keeping track of our position in space through time is a *de facto* condition for our not losing the ability to refer to ourselves as the thinker of our thoughts, via the concept ‘I.’

III- A lesson from a pathological case. Oliver Sack’s “disembodied lady”

III-1 Sacks’ report of Christina’s own description of her situation.

T5: “ ‘What I must do ... is use vision, use my eyes, in every situation where I used – what do you call it? – proprioception before. I’ve already noticed ... that I may ‘lose’ my arms. I think

they're one place, and I find they're another... If [proprioception] goes, as it's gone with me, it's like the body's blind. My body can't 'see' itself if it's lost its eyes, right? So I have to watch it – be its eyes. Right?’

‘Right,’ I said, ‘right. You could be a physiologist.’

‘I’ll have to be a sort of physiologist,’ she rejoined, ‘because my physiology has gone wrong, and may never naturally go right.’”

In Christina’s statements, “I have noticed ..., I think ..., I find..., I have to watch...,” her use of ‘I’ is clearly a use of ‘I’ as subject: the propositional contents of those statements are IEM. And they are not based on information concerning states of her body.

III-2 Sacks’ comment:

T6: *“She had lost, with her sense of proprioception, the fundamental organic mooring of identity – at least of that corporeal identity, or ‘body-ego’ which Freud sees as the basis of self. “The ego is first and foremost a body ego.”*

And yet Christina uses ‘I’, effectively and powerfully. This raises once again the question of the connection between the two most fundamental kinds of consciousness of oneself on which the use of ‘I’ as subject depends: consciousness of a body one experiences as one’s own; consciousness of oneself as engaged in the mental activity of rationally connecting the contents of one’s mental states.

III-3: Sacks’s reference to Sigmund Freud: cf. Freud’s 1923 *The Ego and the Id*.

Freud calls “*Ich*” (“*Ego*” in James Strachey’s translation) the organization of mental occurrences governed by the “reality principle.”

III-4. Representations of our own body are at the core of that organization of mental occurrences called ‘ego’ (*Ich*). This is because all the information we receive from the outside world passes through some state of our body.

T7: *“A person’s own body [der eigene Körper], and above all, its surface, is a place from which both external and internal perceptions may spring. It is seen like any other object, but to the touch it yields two kinds of sensations, one of which may be equivalent to an internal perception. Psychophysiology has fully discussed the manner in which a person’s own body attains its special position among other objects in the world of perception. Pain, too, seems to play a part in the process, and the way in which we gain new knowledge of our organs during painful illnesses is perhaps a model of the way by which in general we arrive at the idea of our body.*

The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but it is itself the projection of a surface.”

Concluding remarks:

There is a distinction *and* connection between the two fundamental kinds of self-consciousness grounding the use of ‘I’ as subject, and thereby every use of ‘I’: consciousness of one’s own embodied existence, consciousness of being engaged in establishing rational connectedness among the contents one’s mental states. Understanding both the distinction and the connection is important to clarify our notions of self and person.