

# The First Person

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**Abstract:** Many languages have a first person singular subject pronoun ('I' in English). Fewer also have a first person singular object pronoun ('me' in English). The term 'I' is commonly used to refer to the person using the term. It has a variety of other uses. A normal person is able to refer to theirself and think about their self and this is of course an important feature of being a person. For any person  $x$ , no one other than  $x$  can possibly think about  $x$  and by that alone, qualify as thinking about theirself. Perhaps this is special. However, there is a strong tendency to conflate this important capacity with capacities of grammar, such as thinking first person thoughts or 'I thoughts.' This leads to attempts to establish necessary truths about persons on the basis of rules of grammar which are not logically necessary. Thinking about oneself does not logically require a first person linguistic capacity. This essay is criticizing various tendencies to overlook this.

**Keywords:** first, I, person, pronoun, singular, subject.

1. It is possible to look in a mirror and see someone other than yourself due to the angle of viewing. So it is possible to see a person in a mirror, knowing it is a mirror image and knowing you are seeing someone, without knowing whether it is you. Suppose A sees a person in a mirror, sees that the person is wounded, and judges "B is wounded" and is mistaken. It is not B. A's error was not about whether there was a wound. The error was in misidentifying the subject of his attribution of woundedness as B. In a second case, A thinks the person in the mirror is – himself. He thinks "That's me – I am wounded." A could be wrong. This could happen in two ways – the appearance of a nasty scrape is really some strawberry jam smeared on the reflected person's back – or the reflected person, the person A calls wounded, is not A.

In these cases, we have seen error due to attributing a property to something which does not in fact have that property. We have also seen error due to misidentifying the thing to which you attribute a property. The thing has the property – there is no error about that – but it is not the thing you *take it to be*. It may be B when you think it is you, or you, when you think it is B, etc. Some philosophers hold that when you think you are wounded, saying "I am wounded" you may misattribute being wounded, but you cannot possibly be mistaken due to misidentification. This is sometimes regarded as an important insight and named the phenomenon of "Immunity to Error through Misidentification" (IEM).

Suppose A thinks he is checking his back in a mirror to see if he is wounded. He is not in pain but may have scraped his back. He is in fact looking through a window. B is on the other side checking B's back. Each is craning his

neck looking at a back, thinking it is their back when in fact it is the other's. B is wounded (has a bit of scrape) while A is not. A sees the scrape and thinks "I am wounded." I say this is an error due to misidentification. A is right about the woundedness but wrong about the subject. This is another case that seems to count against IEM.

2. It is a contingent fact about English that 'I' is the first person singular subject pronoun (fpssp) and 'me' is the first person singular object pronoun (fpsop). People who confuse the roles of 'I' and 'me' could come to be a usage-fixing majority. Some languages do not distinguish between the first person subject pronoun and the first person object pronoun, do not have our distinction between 'I' and 'me.' A speaker who ignores the distinction may be understood perfectly well and be speaking English. "'I' is the fpssp" needs to be explained in correcting such a speaker. It is doubtful that a philosophical explanation would help.

That the English language is not definable may be disputed by philosophers taking a formal system, perhaps an 'interpreted' one, as a paradigm of language. Such paradigms greatly facilitate the formulation of logically precise generalizations, but at the cost of ignoring how language is actually individuated (that is, vaguely). Versions of 'pidgin English' are not English, and subversion of the fpssp-fpsop distinction can be a step toward pidginization. But the assumption that it is a defining characteristic of English to have that distinction is a source of confusion about the function it serves. This is likely to be disputed. It is common to defend generalizations about English by ruling out counterexamples as not really English. This can make it impossible to achieve agreement. It may nonetheless be interesting to pursue.

3. Making it a criterion for a 'correct use' of 'I' that there is a person producing a token and the token refers to that producer, guarantees the doctrine of the automatic user-reference of correct uses of 'I.' A similar rule can be offered for 'me' and then the 'subject - object' distinction can be addressed. The resulting doctrine is a tautology that obscures facts about actual usage. That may be better than such a 'token reflexive rule' as that any token of 'I' refers to whoever produced it (I-yi-yi!). Trivial truth might seem preferable to trivial falsity. But the token reflexive rule is more useful for the purpose of teaching English, where simple rules of thumb that are right in common cases are better than tediously guarded trivialities. You may teach Mog that if he needs to deceive a subpoena server who calls at his door, "Mog is not here" will do, while "I am not here" will be disastrous.

That is because "everybody knows" the token reflexive rule, so the server would take Mog to be referring to himself with 'I' (at least initially, so as to find the remark difficult to make sense of), while there is no such rule for proper names. Whether Mog, in saying "Mog is not here" is referring to himself is unclear because "referring to himself" in the given case is unclear. He is not

directing the attention of his audience to himself at the time. The server will naturally think the person speaking to him is referring to some other person (or, if he is suspicious, Mog's performance will at least make straightforward sense as an effort at deception). But the server has means of determining who the person named 'Mog' is which could lead him to discover Mog's deception. We can understand how the phrases "taking him to be referring to himself," "referring to himself" and "knowing who Mog is" work in the description of possible sayings in this case. Stating logically true general rules about the working of these phrases can be more difficult, and there is a danger of founding the authority of such rules on stipulations which obscure the possible alternate uses.

4. If a society of English speakers has a child they regard as very special, they could name him 'I.' There could be another named 'Me,' etc. (The capitalization of 'Me' is an unnecessary concession to a dispensable convention about names. This community might deal only in speech.) I would learn to avoid using 'I' and might manage with skillful circumlocution or just use 'me.' Me could get by using 'I.' I, in spite of being extremely acute, could become confused, like any human. He might have an episode of thinking he is not I. Seeing himself in a big store mirror, he might point to himself and say "There is I, with terrible posture – thank goodness yours truly doesn't slouch like that!" He mistakenly used 'I' to identify a member of the crowd as being someone other than himself, while correctly commenting on the posture. His hearers could understand this performance in terms of the speaker having lost track of who is named by a name which is in fact his own. It would be amusing but not at all incoherent.

I was not misusing 'I,' but he was not using 'I' as fpssp. What it is to so use 'I'? Is there a logical criterion for such a use? Is there such a property as being a token of 'I'? We may ask, is 'i' a token of 'I'? is 'I' a token of 'i'? is 'i' a token of 'I'? etc. It is interesting to try reading these questions aloud and deciding how to vocalize the symbols. I say there is such a property as being a (written) token of the 9<sup>th</sup> letter of the English alphabet and there is considerable variety in those tokens, capital, lower case, in various typescripts, or in handwriting of various shapes. It is a contingent fact that 'I' is a token of the 9<sup>th</sup> letter of the English alphabet, and contingent that if there is any token of 'I' it is a token of the 9<sup>th</sup> etc. It is not contingent that if there is any token of the 9<sup>th</sup> letter then it is a token of the 9<sup>th</sup> letter. What about the claim that any token of 'I' is a token of 'I'? The question is dubious because "is a token of 'I'" as it works in the question, does not have a clear meaning. (Would it be the same question with 'i'? ) And this is confining our attention just to written tokens. If a colloquial speaker we know well says in speech what we would say in reading aloud "I gives Al a lot of trouble" we can rule out the interpretation on which Al is struggling with the concept of fpssp. We may yet wonder whether Al needs an ophthalmologist, or whether the speaker, whom we know dislikes Al, is reporting harassing Al.

5. Anyone can easily identify tokens of 'I' on a typical textbook page (as opposed to ingeniously contrived problem pages) if it is made clear that any token of the 9<sup>th</sup> letter will qualify. They will then ignore a number of differences and get the common property right. They can do as well for upper case tokens of a given type font, getting that different property right. People's ability to recognize written tokens that differ greatly in their geometric properties is quite striking. This has some connection with the ability to decipher a message, grasp what is said. Flying over a desert island, we may recognize a message stamped into the sand, knowing it is not just a coincidence of wind effect. Reading the message, we may identify a token of 'H.' If we are getting daily messages, the very same token could be left while those around it were erased and replaced, so that that same arrangement in the sand would now be a token of 'A.' (It might be seen as a typo (or stampo) – but it could be as 'directly' identified as the other letters.) This could inspire an attempt to distinguish between an object and various roles it can play. We will then encounter, on the way to the role of fpssp, the role, being a token of 'I.'

A large building may have 'I.B.M. CORPORATION' on its wall in large bronze letters, each separately attached to the wall. The letters are taken down and there is a bronze 'I' four feet tall and quite sturdy. It might come to be used for cutting weeds or as a digging tool, or as a capital Roman numeral one, or in an "I like Wheaties" sign or an ostentatious sign for an extravagant philosophy conference on the IEM problem, etc. If used long term as a large double T square by carpenters, would it be a token of 'I'? If money is riding on the answer, arbitration is needed, otherwise, why ask? Pick up anything (that you can lift). The question "What is this thing, exactly?" may make sense, but it can break down under philosophical pressure. The question can be understood from the perspective of different possible uses, or some other system of classification. Without such background, it can acquire a false aura of difficulty. We will leave the question "What is the word (not the letter or numeral) 'I'?" and take up "being the fpssp." Can we define this property which is commonly attributed to something, the word, or uses of it?

6. Compare the project of defining the roles of subject and predicate. There used to be such as "The subject is the word or group of words which denotes the thing or things of which the predicate is predicated." Such sayings can help students to learn to use grammatical classifications, but as attempts at philosophical definition they are unsatisfactory. There is the problem of grammatical subjects which do not refer, which can lead to debates about reference to nonexistent subjects, and there is a problem about circularity. One response is to choose a few paradigm sentences, perhaps on the grounds that the majority of competent speakers readily count them as 'sentences.' Then lists of words can be made and rules introduced for forming new sentences or compound words.

While the listing of things called 'sentences (words) of English' is based on empirical observation by social scientists, the use made of the lists is strongly

analogous to the construction of a ‘formal language.’ ‘Subject terms’ or ‘noun phrases’ etc. are a list of expressions simply given those titles. Something will be, for example, a ‘name’ because it is listed as a name (or a name because listed under ‘name’). After listing some instances of sentences, there will be formal rules for revising and making further sentences or compound names, etc. (Some such accounts of ‘English’ may even go so far as to include rules of inference or even axioms, so that the ‘system’ may have theorems or be pronounced inconsistent. However, it would be unfair to count such extremes as essential features of the attempts at formal accounts of English.)

‘English’ can thus be presented in a systematic way analogous to a formal language. This will not define the actual language, where it will always be possible for expressions to be recognized as sentences that are not counted by the system. They will be understood by users who count as speaking English. This does not happen for a mathematically defined formal system, but it is not only possible (thus necessarily possible), but likely for a natural language. (Ironically, exceptions to a recursive grammar may be inspired by publishing the grammar and inflaming some rebellious speakers.) Furthermore, these attempts to recursively specify the grammar of English will leave unanswered the natural questions as to what role the expressions in a given classification do serve. We will want something beyond the arbitrary designations. This is not to say nothing can be offered. The systematic arrangement and presentation of sentences as constructed may suggest valuable insights. They will not make actual English any more definable than a person is.

7. Explaining linguistic functions for English expressions in English is highly liable to circularity. It helps somewhat to imagine the explanations being addressed to a foreign speaker in their native language. We tell them that when you want to refer to yourself as subject of your statement, then you use the first person singular subject pronoun, and you can tell them this word is ‘I.’ That may be fine teaching. The student is not thereby prepared to deal with “My dog has fleas” versus “The dog I own has fleas,” etc. but is being given a fair start. As a definition (fpssp use of ‘I’ in S iff use of ‘I’ in S to refer to producer of ‘I’) for even a very restricted simple sort of sentence S avoiding compound phrases, it would be both broad and narrow. You may refer to yourself using your name. We can clear that up somewhat, distinguishing “I am Smith” and “Smith is I,” etc. Rules about matching verb patterns to subjects may be cited as definitive of English, but these are patterns which have changed in the history of the language and can always change. If we recognize that there are logically different kinds of self ‘reference,’ defining ‘the’ function of ‘I’ or of fpssp is liable to confront too many distinct kinds of reference. This can lead to resorting to stipulations which arbitrarily restrict uses that count as ‘fpssp.’

Narrowness is just as bad. The explanation depends on the speaker or producer having the purpose of referring to theirself. Someone talking in their sleep might mutter “I have fleas” without having any intention of referring to

themselves, let alone revealing their embarrassing problem. Whether they are ‘using’ the words they mutters is cloudy. Furthermore, there may be no speaker or producer as agent. It is obvious that a token of such a sentence as (I): “I recommend that you sell your stock” could occur without ‘I’ having any referent. Those seven words could fall out from a pile onto the floor (or be blown against a Velcro wall, etc.) and produce such a token. In fact, in the token displayed in this paper, the ‘I’ does not refer (though ‘I’ is involved in naming the token<sup>1</sup>). That might be explained by appeal to the fact that the sentence is not being used, only mentioned as an example. That is, the sentence, as it occurs in this paper, is not being used, only mentioned. If I perversely went on to set up a use of that sentence in this paper, that could be dismissed by counting sentences and referring to the sentence as it occurs at the nth sentence place for the right n. Then there is a clear mentioner (me) and no user.

However, the sentence, as depicted in the story, has neither a user nor a mentioner, and not even a producer (unless some complex combination of gravity and wind, etc. gets counted). The ‘I’ is just as much the first person singular subject pronoun, whether or not (I) is being used. The explanation might be made subjunctive, in terms of what would be done if the sentence were actually used. If some token were used, then some would say that it is obvious that there must be a user, and the user is the referent of the token of ‘I’ that is used. It is worth discussing this appeal to the idea of ‘using.’

In the story just presented, the token of ‘I’ occurs by coincidence. If the coincidence gets to the level of miraculous, things become unclear. If you are prayerfully agonizing over whether to sell your stock, having (I) fall out from a shelf of words might seem to be a message from above, with the referent of ‘I’ a matter for fearful speculation. This shows that it can be hard to determine whether a token of ‘I’ is being used. If the sentence “‘I’ is the fpssp” falls in place, it might tempt the verdict that a token of ‘I’ got mentioned by accident, raising the question as to who did the mentioning. It would be better to admit that it is neither used nor mentioned, in spite of being in quotation marks, which is a caution against taking quotation marks as a logical guarantee of mention.

8. These odd possibilities do not refute the claim that if the sentence (I) were used, and in such a way that the occurrence of ‘I’ qualified as first person singular subject pronoun, then it follows that the occurrence refers to the user. That leaves the question as to what it is to be a fpssp use. One attempt might be (U): being a first person singular subject pronoun use is, by definition of such a use, a use to refer to the user. Our earlier character I can use ‘I’ in such a way as to disprove (U).

‘The user’ also makes the following case relevant: Bill, a floor worker in a large convention, who has an arrangement with a support crew. When he holds up a placard reading “I need more pamphlets,” his crew brings another stack of

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<sup>1</sup> But not the word ‘I,’ of course! We are being precise!

pamphlets extolling his candidate, A. Another floor worker, Bob, has a similar arrangement with his support crew. When he holds up a placard reading "I need more pamphlets," they rush him a stack of pamphlets extolling his candidate, B. Things are intense in the huge convention and both Bill and Bob are running out of handouts at the same time. Poor Bob lost his placard when a group of drunken conventioneers grabbed it and cut it up to use as playing cards. Though working for opposing parties, Bill and Bob are themselves apolitical and buddies. Bill says, "Don't worry, Bob, we can both use this placard." Rather than take turns, they hold up the placard, one holding one end, the other the other. (Either grip is sufficient to support the placard.) Doesn't the 'I' on the placard make individuating reference both to Bill and to Bob? (Bob might have forgotten a supply of pamphlets stuffed in his shirt, so that his claim is false, while Bill's is true.)

A defender of (U) may hold that there are two uses, with Bob's use referring to Bob and Bill's to Bill. The fact that it was Bill who produced the token is irrelevant. Use outranks production here. This sort of defense of (U) is symptomatic of how deeply entrenched loose claims about the logical status of 'I' or fpssp are. We will persist in examining (U).

9. Here is a recognizable statement of a philosophical view: "It is a necessary condition of moral agency that the agent is capable of thinking I-thoughts." It is obvious that one asserting this is not using 'I' in that assertion to make a singular reference to the assertor. It still seems that they are using 'I' – and as fpssp. We can concede that they are making a self reference, as part of a general reference to all possible moral agents. This shows that using 'I' does not entail individuating reference. A defender of (U) may hold that this only shows this use of 'I' is not a first person singular subject pronoun use. That is an easy reply, but troubling. Shouldn't a 'Cartesian' (not Descartes) want to hold that anyone who thinks an I thought of the I think kind must then be correct in drawing an I exist conclusion (if they live long enough to draw it)? This is a general reference to I thinkers, yes, but the first person singular subject pronoun is used in making that reference. It is not plausible that the 'I' is not, in that use, the first person singular subject pronoun. That could be granted while denying that the use is a first person use, but this makes for confusing terminology. The Cartesian claim is not an individuating reference to the user who is making the claim. But the generalization is about all first person singular subject pronoun based thoughts. That is, about fpssp type thoughts in any language.

This is likely to draw complaints about use-mention confusion and the need for quotation marks. Such complaints are a symptom of the *hubris* arising from inflated estimates of the clarity of this distinction. Smith may say "When a thinker argues from the premise I think to the conclusion I am...." We respond "You mean the thinker you are discussing assumes that *you* (Smith) think and concludes that, that *you* am, er...are?" We mean to warn that the speaker should use quotes. But this conversation was not in writing! And even if it were, what do

the quotes ensure? You may say that Smith did not mean to refer to himself but misspoke by failing to use quotation marks to signal he was not using the 'I.' This is close to the maneuver of reserving the right to class an occurrence of "I" as a use only if it squares with your generalization.

Of course there is a function of quotation, for which quotation marks are merely a tool that may help accomplish it. We mean the function of quoting, not a 'quotation function' for producing names of expressions, with a puzzle as to the nature of the arguments to the function and their names. Achieving the function of quoting cannot be guaranteed by quotation marks. Neither quotation marks nor any other purely formal linguistic devices can logically guarantee non-use in a natural language. If you reveal state secrets, putting your words in quotation marks does not make you less a traitor. Quotation marks do not make obscenities any less obscene<sup>2</sup>, or ensure that you are not producing them for some bad reason.

10. Suppose your native language is a rare tribal language, utterly foreign. You are now in the U.S. and speak English flawlessly. An old friend from the tribe comes to visit, knowing no language but Tribal. He is extremely bright, though, and quick. At a party, he sees an attractive woman and wants a date. You explain to him that he should walk up, smile and say (i) "I am very attractive and you are eager to date me." You explain in Tribal that this is how you say, in English (ii) "You are very attractive and I am eager to date you." We may assume that in this case both (i) and (ii) are true in their ordinary English meaning and both contents are believed by your friend, of course, only in Tribal. Your friend is using the word 'I' to refer to the woman. It may be objected that no, he is misusing it, thus not using it.

On that line you could defend your client against a charge of using a firearm in the commission of a felony.<sup>3</sup> He wasn't using his gun, just misusing it. Not only was the use legally improper, his aim was terrible, etc. Or suppose your client did not know what a gun is, coming from an odd background. He is a genuine crook, though, and wanted to rob a bank. He snatched a gun from the holster of the bank guard because he thought it was a sort of club. He is huge and frighteningly strong, and when he waves this club people obey. He does this and walks out of the bank with a bag of money. Is he not guilty of armed robbery? Your client knowingly used the gun to get the money and your friend knowingly used 'I' to refer to someone else.

It is true that neither knew 'the proper use' of the tool they used. No doubt we do know, though liable to become annoyed if pestered for a precise general formula. The requirement that the user understands what the user is doing will

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<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, the boast: "I will never, in my entire life, *use* even one single, 'fucking' obscenity!" Has the speaker merely mentioned the obscenity without using it?

<sup>3</sup> If this seems too absurd, see the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Smith vs. The United States*, 508 U.S. 223 (1992).

not help much. "Understanding or knowing what you are doing" makes straightforward sense in many natural uses, as in application to the case of the Tribal speaker, who did not know what he was doing. It breaks down badly under philosophical pressure. We are discussing the question: what function must an agent accomplish with a token of 'I' in order to qualify as making a proper fpssp use of 'I'? Requiring that the agent understand what function the agent is accomplishing with the token of 'I,' as a condition of qualifying as making a proper fpssp use of the token, does not show what function that is. If it adds a demand for a general account of understanding to the quest for a general account of the role of the fpssp or of 'I,' it is an unhelpful addition. The Tribal speaker could have been clued in on the prank by his friend and still gone through with it, pretending to be deceived by his friend while "knowing what he is doing." How should that count for his use of 'I'? Presuming there is a general answer is begging an important relevant question.

11. We have already reviewed cases for which it is not true that the proper use of 'I' is to refer to the speaker or writer. There is nothing improper about discussing I-thoughts in general, and without the ritual use of quotation marks. Perhaps those "I thought" cases can be set aside by restricting attention to the kind of sentences containing 'I,' that are 'relevantly similar' to our example (I). "I thought it was Monday" would be relevantly similar, while "Smith's last mental act was an I thought" would not be. Consider then, a computer designed to offer advice on stocks. Details can be important. One detail concerns whether the computer is solely concerned with stocks, or it is a large computer on which various programs can be run, and it is just running a stock evaluation program. At any rate, we plug in data about our stock, the machine whirrs, chugs or otherwise seems busy, and out comes a token of (I). Is this a case in which the computer is using the sentence (I) to offer advice and in doing so, using the pronoun 'I' to refer to the computer (or the app, etc.)?

Perhaps this depends on still further details. When in good working order, the machine dispenses excellent advice. But it is broken down, and when data is plugged in, it just prints out the last advice it offered back when it was working. Any data causes a print-out of (I). Something similar could happen to a person. A famous stock broker may be semi-comatose in a drug rehab program. We try to get a response from him by asking about our stock and he 'responds' with (I). We are encouraged until an attendant tells us that is all he ever says and he says it often, in response to casual greetings from the staff, etc. He is still a person, but is not using the sentence, even if, by some coincidence, his production of the sentence in some case might be misunderstood as a use, and turn out to be excellent advice.

Or the stockbroker could be in jail, and have a meeting with an assistant while under the watchful eye of a guard and the conversation closely recorded. He says (I) and by a secret code, conveys "Smith hid the investment money in a secret account numbered 0769A." He is using (I) and 'I' but not to refer to

himself. The machine could do something like that. We can object that, while (I) may be used here, it is not used in accordance with established usage. Of course we want to follow the advice “Don’t ask for the meaning, ask for the use!” – but only for the use in accordance with the meaning.

Let us stay with the machine and assume it is working well and gives good stock advice by producing (I). What is it that gave the advice? ‘The machine!’ (or the app, etc. I ignore these variations). And what is the basis of its personal (or mechanical) identity? Is there something about it that qualifies it to use the special symbol ‘I,’ or is the special symbol getting used properly what underwrites the identity? Is the ‘I’ that says (I) the ‘I’ that says “I need oiling soon?” The machine might dodge that one by exploiting its ability to print out a large number of tokens at once, even speaking in volumes. It could produce a whole life history of ‘I’s, all at once and brush off the Sartrean question. We could wait for volume 2 and ask whether the ‘I’ that produced it is the ‘I’ that produced volume 1, but this does not have the bite of the original poser.

Some might argue that the machine is not like the ‘I,’ is not a substance, but a mere compound, divisible into parts, unlike the ‘I’ or self. ‘Divisible’ here is unclear. Dividing a machine into its parts can mean it is not presently in existence. It is disassembled. It may be possible to reassemble it, or not, like some machines that curious investigators have been unable to get back into operation. The indivisibility of the self or ‘I’ has been held to prove its immortality. That is highly questionable. The argument appeals to the premise that the self cannot even be divided in thought, making it essentially different from a mere machine. But merely attending, in thought, to various parts of a machine is not dividing it, even in thought, and imagining disassembling it is imagining suspending its existence. Some respectable thinkers presumed to think about the parts of a (the) soul. There would be debate as to whether the rational part could exist without the other parts.

12. Those can be confusing considerations, which might be avoided by rejecting the singular ‘the machine’ as mere linguistic convenience. Properly, there are the various parts and we should be speaking in the plural. We would say the parts are printing various tokens and use the resource of plural quantifiers to free ourselves, or their parts, from the illusion of the machine’s self. But wait! It was ‘the machine’ that was the target, not the human self! We were only discussing exposing the production of ‘I’ talk by a machine as nothing qualifying as a genuine first person singular reference. Ruling that out on the grounds it is not genuine use trivializes the claim that genuine use entails such genuine reference.

13. Still, it is held that the ‘I’ as used by humans is associated with something special. Frege says, in translation,

...everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way in which he is presented to no one else. So, when Dr. Lauben thinks that he has been wounded, he will probably take as a basis this primitive way in which he is

presented to himself. And only Dr. Lauben can grasp thoughts determined in this way. (Frege, 298)

In translation, Frege implies that the way Dr. Lauben would think to himself that he has been wounded is by thinking "I have been wounded" (or a German translation). However, if he wants to let others know he has been wounded, he may still say "I have been wounded" (unless he is speaking to Germans), "but he must use the 'I' in a sense which can be grasped by others, perhaps in the sense of 'he who is speaking to you at this moment'..." (Frege, 298)

The idea that everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way in which he is presented to no one else may be a worthy object of contemplation. It will not be discussed here, beyond noting that this 'way' is not clearly linguistic or a 'sense' of any linguistic expression. There may be a thing which is presented and a thing to which it is presented and possibly a thing which presents the one to the other. When deeply contemplating, say, a sunset, the sunset is present to you, rather than presented, and you are not presented in the object of contemplation. You may then think of the scene as being contemplated and still not need a linguistic expression to designate the contemplator. Yet Frege seems to connect this 'way' of your being presented with a special private 'sense' of 'I' (or 'ich') which can only be grasped by – who? The user. Is there a word which has the power to present you to yourself when you use it? Is the idea that 'I' has this power of presenting when it is 'used' by anyone? It can't be the word by itself, and use requires something to use.

Frege then asks whether the thought Dr. Lauben expresses to himself with "I have been wounded" could be the same thought he conveys to others with that sentence. That seems an idle question in view of Frege's preceding remarks. It is clearly stated that only Dr. Lauben can understand what he is saying to himself with the words "I have been wounded." To then try to locate this private sense would be absurd. Success by some person other than the good doctor would refute the claim that the sense is private to Dr. Lauben.

After a bombing, medics may check to see who needs help. Lauben might say "I have been wounded." It is plausible that he might have achieved the same result with "He who is speaking to you at this moment has been wounded." The medics might blame the odd style of speaking on the trauma. If Dr. Lauben, thinks, just to himself "He who is speaking to you at this moment has been wounded," he might need a special private sense for 'you,' or perhaps he could make do just with such a sense for 'he.' In appealing to the medics 'he' could be dropped for "the one who is speaking to you at this moment." But then, 'you' seems dispensable too. "The person speaking at this moment" ought to suffice for intelligent, well disposed medics. Couldn't it work for Lauben's private thoughts as well? The doctor would think to himself "The person whose thinking is present now has been wounded." But now, what is there to be private but the thinking? Not its content.

When the medics hear “The person speaking at this moment has been wounded,” it would be perverse to respond with “Speaking to whom?” They know well enough who is being addressed and who is addressing them. It is not profoundly different for Lauben’s private inner thought. Suppose he is dazed and thinking out loud, unaware that highly perceptive and kind medics are hovering over him to see if he is alive. Lauben mutters “That bomb was terrible, but it seems that it did not kill all of us. At least one of us has survived, alive though injured. The one of us who is thinking this thought is an example.” The medics hear this and understand. It would be empty and arbitrary to insist they are getting a different thought than a private one understandable only by Lauben. That the thought might well have been unheard is no basis for crediting it with a necessarily private sense. Lauben might have stayed with the first person plural. “Our group has sustained some injuries to its members...” You might as well hold that a group is presented to itself in a particular and primitive way in which it is not presented to outsiders.

14. Thomas Nagel has discussed the view that “The quest for the self, for a substance which is me and whose possession of a psychological attribute will be its being mine, is a quest for something that could not exist.” (Nagel, 355) He describes the view as based on the argument that he could

describe without token-reflexives the entire world and everything that is happening in it – and this will include a description of Thomas Nagel and what he is thinking and feeling [and yet] there seems to remain one fact which has not been expressed, and that is the fact that I am Thomas Nagel. This is not, of course, the fact ordinarily conveyed by those words, when they are used to inform someone else who the speaker is – for that could easily be expressed otherwise. It is rather the fact that I am the subject of these experiences...  
(Nagel, 355)<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to determine in a general way, what would be required for anyone, me or others, to qualify as knowing who I am, without an account of what is involved in knowing who I am. And that is not a promising project, since everyone is an indefinite variety of things, and knowing who you are is an evaluative notion which allows such as “I had not yet realized who I really am,” “We thought we knew you!” etc. If I were to embark on giving you an interminable description of the entire world there are likely views you might adopt about who I am, not to mention what (and a similar attitude might occur to me in my private thought, that perhaps it is time to stop), but the possibility of my surprising you, or myself, would always remain. That does not license the conclusion that I could not let you know who I am, with or without token

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<sup>4</sup> Nagel cited Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* 5.64, which includes “The I in solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point...” That is use of ‘I’ without quotes. The original German is “Das Ich des...” Usually ‘ich’ is not capitalized. This usage no doubt means something. 5.641 includes “The philosophical I is not the man, not the human body or the human soul of which psychology treats, but the metaphysical subject, the limit, not a part of the world.” Is that use of fpssp?

reflexives. A better lesson is that “who I am” is at least as open as “what I have done or may be able to do.” Even what I have done is necessarily open to revision by historians. (We might call it a ‘judgment call,’ keeping in mind Judgment Day, when of course, it will finally be gotten right.)

15. Anything that can be said at all can be said unclearly. An important example is the point that anything that one can say to oneself can be said to someone else. This point is obscured by a variety of considerations. There is Robinson Crusoe and related types. There is Einstein stranded on a big island (make it Manhattan) of simple natives, trying to explain to them about relativity. But some philosophers also think there is the private inner states of a person, which are accessible only to the person and include items which may be identified by subject terms or described by predicate terms comprehensible only to the person. They are encouraged by the point that there may in fact be no one available who can understand you, other than your self. We could reply that, for every thing one can say to oneself, it is logically possible that there should be a distinct person to whom that thing could be said and that this is essential to what it is to be a saying. That is sadly lacking in punch. Better to say that, if you can say something to yourself, you can say it to someone else. When tempted to say “Only I can understand this thought” it is well to bear in mind that everybody can understand that sentiment and consider also that the sentiment not only does not require the implied thought, but is reason to suspect there is none.

16. This is not to deny (or affirm) that there are private experiences. Essential privacy is another matter. Here is a perfectly possible case. A large military base has a bad problem with malingering. A standard complaint is severe migraine attacks requiring the day off. In desperation, authorities turn to a remarkable psychic. When he palpates the skull of someone suffering a headache, a duplicate of the pain (or the pain, if you prefer) travels up the psychic’s arm to his head, where the headache is exactly duplicated (or briefly resides). Of course philosophers jostle about this, but the man can produce at a level that makes these skeptics purely academic. Testing on honest people with no motive for deception, the psychic unfailingly spots the headache sufferers and unerringly tells whether the pain is localized and if so, where it is, etc. Turned loose on the soldiers, his authority is quickly established. Soon very few soldiers try to fake a headache.

Our man is then loaned out to an even larger base. There are so many claiming headaches that the psychic is set up in an easy chair on a four foot high stand. He just reaches over and feels each head as the line of candidates files slowly by. After a long day, the weary psychic is feeling an odd, leathery, bald head. He says “This man has no problem...but wait... he is in fact beginning to develop a headache. It is coming on fast and getting worse and worse! Wow! What a doozy! Thank goodness I don’t have this headache! This man clearly deserves time off!” As it turns out, an office wag is holding up a soccer ball. The

psychic realizes to his dismay that this headache is in fact his own. He has mistakenly identified himself as someone who does not have a headache.

It will surely be objected that, every time the psychic feels a headache, he has that headache – so the psychic is making a conceptual mistake in speaking as he does. There could be a call for careful study of the logic of the relations “subject x has headache y” and “subject x feels headache y” and related locutions. There is a risk that ‘results’ of this study will be protected by stipulations, perhaps disguised as logical facts. Or it might just be insisted that it is impossible to feel someone else’s pain (perhaps ‘literally’). Every pain you feel is thereby privatized. No sense can be made of the idea of a pain getting loose and running through a large crowd, etc. There would always be an alternative way of describing the phenomenon which would preserve the right theories.

The truth is, that even if your pain is ever so private, if you are able to say what it is like, you can say it to other people, and this includes saying who it belongs to. You may insist that feeling is a kind of thinking – very well – but even that is not enough to make it a kind of speaking. Being in pain of course does not entail saying anything. But saying anything about anything entails being accessible to an audience. You may indeed have a feeling, and be unable to say what it is like, while there is, nonetheless, what it is like, what kind of feeling it is. But any feeling, like anything whatever, will be of many kinds. Any kind that can be understood and identified by one person can be understood and identified by others, and identified to others and also misidentified and misunderstood, by one and all.

17. There is a genuine logical distinction between first, second and third person reference. How these distinctions are conventionally marked in our language is a matter of contingent facts that are not essentially tied to the distinctions. Consider a case in which 100 highly intelligent people, each speaking a different language, are stranded on a tropical island. No one can understand any other’s language. They can recognize that one of them is a doctor and two are nurses, and that those three have vital medical equipment and skills. There is a storm, with stuff flying around. Wounds are serious because of danger of infection. One person, A, pulls up his shirt and points to a cut across his abdomen, thus informing B that A has been wounded. B turns to signal for help and A notices that B has a cut on his back. A whistles to B and points to B’s back and shows concern, conveying to B that B’s back is wounded. A then points to C, that is, points out C to B. C is busy with something else and is not watching A. A points to a wound on C’s back which C has not noticed.

A has drawn attention to wounds of A, B and C in performances that are first, second and third person in character. This is a matter of the way the references are presented to the audience and the vantage point of the audience and not of the way any words have been used. A would have said “I am wounded, you are wounded and she is wounded” if he had been talking to English speakers, but he did not need words. (The third person performance would not have been

distinguishable from the second person performance if C had been in the audience.)

In setting out a formal system, one can define a symbol, as a symbol of that system, as associated with some logical notion, say material implication. It will be true by definition of that system that that symbol is for material implication. This does not restrict the possible use of that symbol absolutely, but only as it functions as a symbol of that formal system. In natural language, there is never such restriction on the use of a symbol as a symbol of the language, but only as a symbol in some dialogue, which may involve varying numbers of people. A term in a dialogue, say, a mathematical one, can have a definition, as a term of that dialogue. As a term of a natural language, it can have a lexical definition, that is, a list of things it is commonly used to mean, but not a logical definition – as a term of English. That is, having that definition is not essential to its being a term of English. This contingency of facts about use is an essential feature of natural language. There may be something special about some cases of one's access to oneself in thought or speech and a word may be very useful in achieving such access. If we want to discover some conceptual truth about this sort of access it will be poor procedure to try to formulate results in terms of facts about words.

18. In discussion about the nature of persons, one idea advanced is that a person is a being capable of thinking first person thoughts. This is not relying on 'I,' and it may not be relying on a grammatical category. The above example of A,B and C and the island injuries should suffice to make sense of a first person thought, A's, that he is wounded, which does not require any language statement in the first person. This may be opposed on the grounds that A's message was a way of saying "I am injured." Consider then, one last try against this language obsession. We have another island group, all English speakers, and they evolve into a version of English with no personal pronouns. They just use names. Smith says "Smith is wounded" and when she falls in love with the nurse, she tells the nurse "Smith loves Jones" and the nurse replies "Jones loves Smith too."

This linguistic community can get along with no first person sentences in their collective vocabulary. There will be loss of some convenience requiring extra work in clarifying some thoughts. But clarification is always likely to be required in any language. If this community nonetheless gets credited with first person thoughts, that is fine. The idea of defining a person as a being capable of first person thoughts is liable to circularity, especially if 'capable' is taken as loosely as it should be. There are severely handicapped persons for whom the capacity to think first person thoughts can only be restored or bestowed by God. The circularity of the definition might be dodged by confusing the capacity for first person thought with the ability to make correct use of the English word 'I.' We are not talking about a function which is essentially linguistic, though it is contingently expressed in most language by having a special grammatical category.

James Cargile

Nothing said here is meant to disparage inner meditation on the soul and its hopes of eternal life. On the contrary, such valuable reflection is facilitated by being kept clear from the idolatry of grammar worship.

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