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WHAT IS IT TO KNOW WHAT 'I' REFERS TO?

1. *Conceptual Role vs. Reference*

We can make a distinction between the conceptual role of the first person and the reference of the first person. By 'conceptual role' I mean the use that is made of the term: the kinds of procedures that we use in verifying judgements using the term and the kinds of actions we perform on the basis of judgements involving the term. In "Self-Notions," Perry talks about conceptual role using the phrase, 'epistemic/pragmatic relations'. He says there are "normally self-informative" ways of getting information and "normally self-dependent" ways of acting. These ways of getting information about the self, and ways of acting dependent on the self, constitute what I am calling the conceptual role of the first person. Perry indeed says, "I believe that what is special about self-notions is that they are the normal repository of normally self-informative ways of perceiving, and the normal motivator of normally self-dependent ways of acting." (Perry 1990)

Just so that we have a concrete example of the kind of transition that constitutes the conceptual role of the first person, suppose we look at the relation between the first person and the spatial content of perception and action. We can distinguish between a relational use of the spatial prepositions, as when I say, 'the child is in front of the car', and a monadic use: primitive uses of 'right', 'left', 'up', 'down', and so on, which do not specify any reference object but merely express locations in the visual field.

We use relational notions when we say, for example, 'It's on Bill's left', 'He stood on the mountain with the city below him', and so on. These notions specify the person whose right or left, up or down is in question. They are two-place notions: 'x is to y's left', 'x is below y', and so on. So these relational notions provide the general conception of something's being in front of or behind, for instance, an arbitrary subject. Suppose, though, that we are trying to characterise the spatial content of vision. Here we do not need the general conception of something's being

to the right or left of an arbitrary subject. An animal with spatial vision may be unable to represent anybody else's right or left, only its own. Yet it is not as if the animal has to be an ever-present object in its own visual field; it would not be right to suppose that we have a relational egocentric location being given, but always in fact in relation to the same object. To suppose that would be to credit the animal with the possibility of representing locations in terms of someone else's right or left, and there may be no possibility of that happening. So the relational egocentric notions are not what we need to characterise the spatial content of the animal's vision. The same seems to be true of the basic egocentric content of ordinary human vision. Objects are located at various places in the subject's egocentric space; but there is no argument-place through which different values can be run as the person whose right and left, and so on, are being represented.

What we need here are, rather, the more primitive monadic egocentric terms. These are notions such as 'x is to the right', 'x is below', and so on. These are in a sense "viewpointed" representations. But the representations themselves do not make it explicit whose viewpoint is being represented. (We might compare here Lichtenberg's comment on Descartes: in effect, that if the subject is capable of representing only her own thoughts, then it would not be right to suppose that the subject has the thought 'I am thinking', since she cannot run different values through the position occupied by 'I'. Rather, the subject has only the implicitly viewpointed representation, 'there is thinking'.)

How does the first person relate to egocentric space? How is a monadic formulation like 'that cup is to the right', related to a relational formulation like 'that cup is to my right'? If you think only of your own case, the introduction rule for a relational egocentric notion will be something like:

PERCEPTION: x is to the right

x is to my right

And the elimination rule for the first person will be something like:

x is to my right

MOTOR: to reach x, move to the right

The aspects of the conceptual role of the first person tell us something about the conditions under which a first-person judgement is verified, and something about the kinds of actions that you can make on the basis of a first-person judgement.

Putting matters like this may make it seem hard to understand why we bother using the first person at all. After all, an animal whose vision had monadic egocentric content and whose motor system could execute commands given in monadic egocentric terms would be able to see something as to the right, and consequently to reach the object by moving to the right. The shuffle through the use of the first person in such a locution as 'x is to my right' seems, from this perspective, to be a waste of time.

I think it is instructive here to compare the first person to a logical constant such as 'and'. We have the introduction and elimination rules for 'and'. Given those introduction and elimination rules, we know how to use the term. But, on a classical view, there is more to an understanding of 'and' than merely the ability to use it in accordance with the introduction and elimination rules. On a classical view, your knowledge of the meaning of 'and' is provided by your grasp of the truth-table for the term, which validates the use of those introduction and elimination rules. It is also instructive to compare the first person to a perceptual demonstrative, such as 'that chair'. Of course, there are the inputs to and outputs from the use of the perceptual demonstrative. But ordinarily, we would think that there is more to our understanding of the perceptual demonstrative than the pattern of use that we make of the term. There is, furthermore, knowledge of the reference of the term; and we would ordinarily think that we use a demonstrative the way we do because we know what it stands for. In the case of both propositional constants and perceptual demonstratives, we would usually take it that there is more to an understanding of the term than a grasp of the pattern of use of the term. Your understanding of the term is provided, rather, by your knowledge of the reference of the term, which is what explains why you use it the way you do. Furthermore, knowledge of the reference of the term provides knowledge of the reason why the pattern of use associated with the term is correct. Now the detailed analyses of the propositional constants and of perceptual demonstratives are themselves difficult topics. But here I want to focus on the first person, and to ask: can we think of knowledge of the reference of the first person as providing one with a semantic foundation for the use that one makes of the first person?

On one view, which I think I share with Perry, knowledge of the reference of the first person does indeed provide you with a semantic foundation for the use that you make of the first person. This is why the first person is, in Perry's term, essential (Perry 1979). Without an understanding of the first person, you could make the transitions from spatial vision to spatial action that an animal makes, but you would have no grasp of why those transitions are correct.

The alternative view is that grasp of the first person does not provide any semantic foundation for the use you make of the term; on this view the pattern of use has no semantic foundation. What grasp of the first person adds to the primitive capacity for spatial action on the basis of spatial vision is just that you can now verify and find the implications of informative identities involving the first person. There is now a whole extra dimension to your internal file management: you can now merge your 'self' file with other files, and consequently enrich the bases of your actions when using the 'self' file. But this extension of the pattern of transitions you go in for has no semantic foundation.

Someone who takes the first view will, of course, accept that grasp of the first person means that you can verify and act on the basis of informative identities. Perry first exhibited the idea of the indexical as being essential by remarking that it is needed to state the content of the moment of illumination when someone following a trail of sugar around a supermarket finally realises "I am the shopper who is making that mess" (Perry 1979). But according to the first view, this is a consequence of the more fundamental point, that your knowledge of the reference of the first person confronts you with the explanation of why this extended pattern of use is correct. On this first view, but not on the second view, the extra contribution made by your understanding of the first person shows up even when we do not consider the informative identities involved in a Perry-style moment of revelation. On the first view, the reason the indexical is essential shows up even when we consider the primitive transitions between spatial vision and spatial action.

2. *The "Film" Subject*

A simple way to dramatise the issue is to consider what I will call a "film" subject, and I want now to try to state the question in terms of this person. As I've said, vision ordinarily does not just provide you with knowledge of what is going on the world; it provides you with knowledge

of your own relations to it all. You see not just that there are people seated around a table, but where you are in relation to them; you see that you are to the left of Bill and across from Sam, with a glass in front of you. It is, though, a familiar point that in watching a film, you need not be constantly asking, "and who is it that is observing all this?" It is possible for a film to be shot so as to be, as it were, the visual autobiography of a single subject. So you would see on screen what the subject sees as she enters a room, people speaking to the subject speak to camera, and so on. This kind of shot is familiar, and often a film will contain some such shots. But it is not ordinarily like that all the way through a film. Indeed, it would often be intrusive to be struck by the thought that there is someone who is watching the scene shown on the screen. If, on the screen, we see Robinson Crusoe lamenting the wretched loneliness of his existence, the effect would be lost if we took it for granted that the scene must be showing what some observer of Crusoe was seeing.

This point was made some time ago by Bernard Williams in "Imagination and the Self." I think we can generalise it somewhat. It seems to apply not just to fictional films, but to documentaries. That is, a documentary film can be showing the scene as police and protestors clash in a town square, without purporting to show the visual autobiography of a single subject. Indeed, it is possible to watch such a documentary without it occurring to you to ask how the thing was shot. You can watch a film of two brave mountaineers reaching the summit in a blizzard, and it comes as a shock when someone puts to you the question how the film was obtained, if those two were indeed the only people around. You can watch the documentary, as it were, unreflectively, in that, though you may be gripped by it and full of inquiries about the scene being shown, piecing together your impression of the town square or the peak from the film, you simply do not ask how the film was obtained.

I want to consider the possibility of a subject who regards his own perceptions in something like this way. That is, the subject—suppose we call him Jim—is untouched by Cartesian scepticism about the external world. He takes it for granted that everything he sees really is happening. The other people, the tables and chairs, the mountains and sunsets, are all there just as he sees them, and he uses vision to find out about them. Jim is, however, sceptical about whether any of this has anything to do with

him. In effect, he refuses point-blank to engage in the kinds of transaction between monadic and relational spatial notions that I described as introduction and elimination rules for the first person. It is not that he is sceptical about the self. Rather, though he takes it for granted that there is such a thing as the self, and indeed, that there is such a thing as himself, he finds no reason to believe that any of what he sees has anything to do with him. So this subject sees no reason to take it that his vision provides him with a visual autobiography.

This subject, then, is sceptical about the introduction rule for the first person. Our "film" subject may also be sceptical about the elimination rule. The subject, may, of course, find that it is possible to act on the world shown on the screen, as it were. That is, the subject can reach and manipulate objects to the right or the left, and so on. But it is possible for me to move and act on a space that I am not in. Consider someone playing a video game. Someone playing the game is moving and acting in the space shown on the screen. But there need be no assumption, not even in pretence or make-believe, that the subject is himself in the space shown on the screen, any more than a chess-player has to take up the spatial perspective of the pieces on the board. So even if our subject had some way of finding out what was on his right or left, that would not have any immediate implications for his actions on the space he observes. Just so, what is on the chess-player's right or left has no immediate implications for his movements of the pieces on the board. So our "film" subject resists the use of the elimination rule in action.

The two views I distinguished earlier have quite different reactions to this case of Jim, the "film" subject. According to the view on which there is no semantic foundation for the pattern of use that we have for the first person, there really is nothing to be said to Jim. The best we could do is to try to socialise him into making the same kinds of transition as the rest of us; but in the end it may simply be that he goes his way and we go ours. According to the first of the views I distinguished, though, on which there is a semantic foundation for the pattern of use that we make of the first person, we ought to be able to provide Jim with an explanation of why the standard pattern of use is correct, and in that sense at any rate, to provide some explanation of why he should change his ways. The problem, though, is to set out what that explanation would look like.

3. *Looking for a Semantic Foundation*

The simplest, most immediate proposal would be to gloss the meaning of 'I' as being something like: 'I' stands for whoever it is that these monadic spatial perceptions provide information about. This suggestion does immediately solve the problem of validating the transition rules we are considering. It also, however, immediately runs into a number of further problems of its own, which I want to set out briefly, since I think problems of this general type affect many of the proposals you might make.

First, this proposal gives the self the status of an hypothesised entity. There is the hypothesis that these monadic spatial perceptions provide information about *somebody*, and 'I' is just introduced as a name for that thing, whatever it is. We haven't yet ruled out the hypotheses that there may be nothing of which these monadic spatial perceptions provide information, or that there may be many things of which they provide information.

Secondly, hypotheses about the mode of presentation expressed by 'I' generally are vulnerable to a kind of "Open Question" argument. G. E. Moore famously said that any naturalistic reduction of goodness to a property F can be refuted by remarking that the question, "But is F good?" will always make sense (Moore 1903). Similarly, given any attempt to characterise the mode of presentation expressed by the first person, say as a mode of presentation X, the question, "But am I X?," will generally make sense. And that does seem to show that the modes of presentation are different. In this case, the question, "Am I the person of whom spatial perception gives knowledge?," certainly seems to make sense. So we cannot yet have expressed the sense of the first person.

Thirdly, although I have focused on one type of transition rule involving the first person, there are of course very many different ways we have of finding out about ourselves, and very many different modes of action on the basis of first-person thoughts. Without investigating the point in detail, it as yet seems unlikely that the current proposal will be capable of generalisation, to validate the whole range of modes of self-knowledge and action that we have.

As I understand him, Perry's inclination is to offer a different proposal (Perry 2001). His strategy is to try to find solutions to broadly cognitive puzzles involving the first person at the level of what he calls "reflexive content." So we could look for a semantic basis for the pattern of use associated with the first person at the level of reflexive content. We can for the moment take it that the reflexive content of a first-person statement, 'I

am F', is something like: 'the speaker of this utterance is F'. Does this give us what we need?

Notice first that this proposal, too, gives the self the status of a hypothesised entity. The concrete datum is that there is an utterance, and then there is the hypothesis that this utterance must have had a speaker; there must be someone who produced this utterance. 'I' is then introduced as a name for whomever that person is. We have not yet eliminated the possibility that no-one produced the utterance, or that it was produced by a number of people acting in cooperation.

Moreover, the hypothesis of a producer for the utterance is introduced afresh with each new self-standing use of the first person. If I say, 'I am F', there is a reference to the hypothesised producer of that utterance. There is, so far, no particular reason to suppose that it is one and the same person who produced both utterances. Of course you might look for evidence: similarities of style or accent, for example. But that is very far from the easy knowledge of sameness of producer that we would ordinarily take ourselves to have.

The reason we ordinarily take ourselves to have such easy knowledge of coproduction is that we ordinarily take ourselves to know which actions we performed, and utterances are just a special case of this. I know that it was I who said, 'I am F', and I know that it was I who said, 'I am G', so of course the sameness of the producer is apparent to me. But Perry's appeal to reflexive content turns this procedure on its head. On his proposal, we have to start with the bare fact of the utterances produced, and then work back to hypotheses about the postulated producer or producers of those utterances. That is why we have to cope with these unfamiliar problems.

Secondly, Perry's proposal also seems vulnerable to the Open Question argument. Suppose that evidence is amassed that one and only one person did indeed produce a number of utterances, and suppose we introduce 'X' as a name for whomever it was that produced them all. So 'X' works in the way that Perry thinks that 'I' works. The trouble is that, relying on our ordinary understanding of 'I', the question, "But am I X?," seems to make perfect sense. And since the question makes perfect sense, the modes of presentation expressed by 'I' and 'X' must be different. And this would be so even if the utterances we are considering were all, in fact, produced by me.

Thirdly, and finally, it seems to me quite unlikely that this proposal will yield a validation of the multiplicity of ways we have of finding out about ourselves, such as spatial self-knowledge, memory and introspec-

tion. I will not here attempt to argue the point through for the case of the "film" subject, but I take it that it is immediately obvious that appealing merely to the reflexive content of the first person as a way of changing Jim's ways is likely to be attended with difficulties.

There is a rather different style of approach to knowledge of the reference of the first person, which takes it to consist in possession of knowledge of, or possession of an ability to find out, an informative identity stated using the first person. On this approach, to know the reference of the first person is to know an identity of the form, 'I am N. N.'

There is an immediate problem for this approach, which is that, on the face of it, we have to use the conceptual role of the first person to establish the identity; but then finding out the identity seems to presuppose a knowledge of the reference of the first person that would validate the use of this way of establishing an informative identity.

Suppose we set aside this problem for a moment, though, to look briefly at Evans's way of implementing this approach (Evans 1982). On Evans's account, an understanding of the first person is characterised by describing the pattern of use that the speaker makes of the first person: the bases on which the speaker makes first-person judgements, and the implications that are drawn from them, whether for inference or for action. What is it to know the reference of the first person? Evans's suggestion is, in effect, that this knowledge is achieved by using the introduction rule above, finding one's own location on the basis of vision, and then using that to establish the truth of an identity of the form, 'I am D', where what replaces 'D' is a description of the subject as the person at a particular objective spatial location. The rationale for this proposal is provided by the claim that predicates which can be coupled with the first person are, in the first instance, introduced and explained, not in the context of first-person propositions, but rather in the context of propositions of the form 'D is F'. So in order to have an understanding of 'I' which can allow you to use 'I' in concert with these predicates, you do need to know what would make true an identity of the form, 'I am D'. The trouble with this proposal is that there is no very evident reason to suppose that the predicates applicable to persons are actually introduced and explained at this "objective" level of thought. Indeed the whole philosophical tradition, in discussing psychological predicates, has been to suppose that they are first introduced and explained in the context of first-person propositions.

4. *Explanatory Justifications*

I think that at this point we should go back and review just what we are looking for, in supposing that the speaker who knows the reference of the first person should thereby know a semantic justification for the use that is made of the term. Suppose first that we compare and contrast the role of truth tables in providing a justification for the use that is made of a propositional constant, on a classical view of propositional constants. Notoriously, there is no possibility of using truth tables to provide a justification of the logical laws for the benefit of someone who is sceptical about the use of logic. Any attempt to use the truth tables to explain the logical laws will itself have to rely on the use of logical transitions at some point, and the sceptic will protest that those transitions stand in need of justification. In response to this point, Michael Dummett famously distinguished between suasive and explanatory justifications of deduction (Dummett 1978). He proposed that a justification of logical laws could make use of logical transitions provided that the aim was merely to explain the correctness of logical laws, rather than to demonstrate their correctness to a sceptic. His idea was that there would be the problem of circularity in giving the justification so long as the technique used in giving the explanation was one which meant that the logic assumed for the metalanguage in which the explanation was given was simply inherited by the object language. But so long as there is no immediate guarantee of inheritance here, it should be possible to use a semantic theory to justify particular logical transitions.

I set up the problem of finding a semantic justification for the use of the first person as being to establish why the "film" subject should mend his ways, and fall in line with the rest of us in his use of the first person. But it is arguable that there is a similar point to be made here: that we should not look for a demonstration that the usual rules should be observed, so that we really can prove to him that the "film" subject is making an error. Perhaps, rather, we should simply be looking for an explanation of why the usual rules are the right ones, an explanation that may be assumed to be available to the ordinary subject on the basis of an ordinary understanding of the term.

A colleague who was working on the justification of deduction once lamented: "If I could have just one use of *modus ponens* for free, then I could do all the rest." Similarly, when thinking about the justification of

the use of the first person, it would be very natural to lament: "If I could have for free just one informative identity involving the first person, then I could do all the rest." In the case of deduction, it seems to me that the right reaction is to say that you can make use of *modus ponens* in giving an explanatory justification, provided the explanation meets some minimal conditions of non-circularity. Similarly, I want to suggest, you can make use of an informative identity in justifying the use that is made of the first person, provided that some minimal conditions on non-circularity are met.

I want to propose that we should think of the ordinary speaker as, in the first instance, learning a mass of rules of use for the first person. The ordinary speaker does not first learn the reference of the first person, then derive the pattern of use from that. Rather, the pattern of use is learnt directly. Nonetheless, the speaker is in a position thereby to confirm the truth of various informative identities. And I want to suggest that it is only through his grasp of such informative identities that the speaker has any understanding of the correctness of these rules for the use of the first person. There is no immediate threat of circularity here: any one informative identity that you accept has to explain how the multitude of ways we have of finding out about ourselves, and acting on the basis of first-person propositions, can all be taken to relate to one and the same thing.

A principal merit of this proposal, it seems to me, is that it explains why personal identity is such a contested issue. Our first fix on the identities of persons is through our grasp of the first person. Whatever else a person is, a person is what is referred to by an ordinary use of 'I'. But because there is always something hypothetical and provisional about the identification of any concrete object as the referent of the first person, there is always going to be something hypothetical and provisional about any particular analysis of personal identity.

There is a sharp contrast here between the first person and a perceptual demonstrative. Someone who understands a perceptual demonstrative, such as 'that tree', is directly confronted with the object which is the referent of the term, and this confrontation with the thing itself is what provides grasp of the justification for the use that one makes of the demonstrative. There is nothing hypothetical or provisional here about the identification of a particular thing as the referent of the term (except, of course, for the special case in which the referent of the demonstrative is a person). But

one of the points that was so instructive about Anscombe's article, "The First Person" (Anscombe 1975), was that it made it evident that we have no such direct confrontation with the self to constitute knowledge of the reference of the term. Rather, we have only the provisional hypotheses provided by our grasp of various informative identities.

5. *Anscombe*

An alternative reaction would, of course, be to say that we ought to abandon the search for a semantic foundation for our use of the first person. There are only the patterns of use, and no explanation to be given of them. This was essentially G. E. M. Anscombe's position in her famous paper, "The First Person," in which she claimed that the first person does not refer. This claim is generally rejected, simply because philosophers have thought that when there is a use of the first person, there is, after all, always someone around who can be brought forward as the referent. But this is an extremely superficial response to Anscombe's point. Her claim is best understood as making the point that the ascription of reference to the first person is empty or idle; it does no explanatory work.

In fact it may be that Anscombe misstated her own point by putting it as the dramatic claim that 'I' does not refer. A better way to put the point might have been to insist that in the case of the first person, the pattern of use is fundamental, and is given no explanatory justification at all by knowledge of the reference of the term. It would have been consistent with this point to accept that it would be legitimate to introduce a disquotational or deflationary notion of reference, perhaps using some such rule as "Any utterance of the first person refers to the utterer," while maintaining that this deflationary notion of reference provides no justification, of any kind, for the use that we make of the term.

Still, it is not easy to accept that there is only the pattern of use, and that it stands in need of no semantic foundation whatever. Suppose we have a creature who, though intelligent and capable of conceptual thought, and of spatial action on the basis of spatial vision, does not have the first person. And suppose we propose to this creature that it should introduce the first person to its conceptual repertoire, using the introduction and elimination rules I stated earlier. If the pattern of use really needs no semantic foundation, then on the face of it the creature now has considerable freedom in determining what procedures it will use in establishing and

finding the implications of informative identities involving the first person. It might use its new procedures to establish that it is identical to Napoleon, or to an immaterial soul, for example. And there will be nothing to be said in criticism of its way of going on. That may be the truth, but it is hard to believe it.

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10. **QUOTATION MARKS:** *Mentioned* terms or expressions are enclosed in single quotation marks with no intervening punctuation. Otherwise standard American literary usage is to be followed, as stipulated, e.g., in the University of Chicago *Manual of Style*. Special conventions, if followed consistently, are permitted where formal language is used.
11. **SPECIAL TYPOGRAPHY:** Diagrams, tables, and illustrations should be on separate sheets with their desired position in the text clearly indicated. Symbolic formulae appearing as separate lines should be clearly distinguished in the text. Foreign letters (Greek, German, etc.), special symbols, as well as zero and capital O and prime marks should be indicated in the margin. Materials to be printed in italics, especially single letters in text or in formulae, should be underlined.

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&
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Papers may now be submitted to the Editor of THE MONIST for publication in the following special issues, each of which is devoted to a single general topic specified by the Editorial Board. No paper can be considered which has been published elsewhere.

<i>Publication Date</i>	<i>Volume</i>	<i>General Topic</i>	<i>Deadline for Papers</i>
Oct. 2003	86:4	Art and the Mind	Oct. 2002
Jan. 2004	87:1	On Function	Jan. 2003
Apr. 2004	87:2	Self-Consciousness	Apr. 2003
July 2004	87:3	Simples	July 2003
Oct. 2004	87:4	Personal Identity	Oct. 2003
Jan. 2005	88:1	Humor	Jan. 2004
Apr. 2005	88:2	Conformism	Apr. 2004
July 2005	88:3	Time Travel	July 2004
Oct. 2005	88:4	Ordinary Objects	Oct. 2004
Jan. 2006	89:1	Truth	Jan. 2005
Apr. 2006	89:2	The Foundations of International Order	Apr. 2005
July 2006	89:3	Coming into Being and Passing Away	July 2005
Oct. 2006	89:4	Genetics and Ethics	Oct. 2005
Jan. 2007	90:1	Sovereignty	Jan. 2006

Instructions:

Scholars in philosophy or related disciplines who wish to submit papers for any of the above special issues of THE MONIST should communicate *well in advance* with the Editor and ask for Special Instructions defining the scope of the general topics in which they are interested. Papers may be from 4,000 to 8,000 words in length—or about 10 to 20 double-spaced typewritten pages, including notes. Two clear copies should be submitted (one clear copy from contributors outside the U.S. and Canada), and these will not be returned.

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