

Some Further Remarks on the “I”

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1. Introductory Remarks

In Wittgenstein's discussion of first person psychological statements, we find a number of remarks that point to a semantic difficulty in the use of such ascriptions. The meaning ambiguity is due to the fact that one and the same proposition can both be used to state a matter of fact and a metaphysical assumption. Hence a sentence such as, e.g., “Only my pain is real pain” might mean that all others except me are only pretending. In a solipsistic context, however, the claim is supposed to express that nobody except me *can* be in pain.

One of the problems involved in such usages lies, according to Wittgenstein, in our constant confusion and change of these two different cases (cf. Wittgenstein 1993, 288). This paper only concentrates on the plurivalent appliances of the word “I” and a possible way to avoid such ambiguities by introducing semantic rules that provide different linguistic settings for empirical and metaphysical contexts.

Since the discussion of whether “I” is a referring expression has been one of the most important and outstanding questions in the writings on Wittgenstein's philosophy, essential problems have to be left unmentioned. The main part of this contribution is therefore restricted to various uses of the first person pronoun, some of which are modeled on cases where the “I” does refer to some entity and others where the question of reference does not arise.

2. Case differentiations

In *The Blue and Brown Books* Wittgenstein distinguishes a subjective and an objective use of the word “I”. Examples of the latter would be sentences like “I am six feet tall”, “I broke my arm” etc. Here, identification of a particular person is needed, including possible errors. The former use of “I” is restricted to psychological predications such as “I see so and so”, “I am in pain” etc. In this case no particular person is recognized as being the one who is in pain or sees so and so. This difference, however, might lead one to assume that the pronoun refers to some mental substance of a Cartesian kind. Wittgenstein remarks: “We feel then that in the cases in which ‘I’ is used as subject, we don't use it because we recognize a particular person by his bodily characteristics; and this creates the illusion that we use this word to refer to something bodiless, which, however, has its seat in our body. In fact this seems to be the real ego, the one of which it was said, ‘Cogito, ergo sum’” (Wittgenstein, 1972, 69-70). Now, one way to avoid the assumption could be to eliminate the word “I” in subjective usages. This, however, also requires case differentiations *within* such contexts, granted the thesis of a semantic dichotomy equally holds for subjective applications.

The first case we could call a “quasi-objective” one. In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein argues that there are instances where I say “I” and point to my body *analogous* to situations where we say “she is in pain” when she cries, is covered in blood etc.: “If, in saying ‘I’, I point to my own body, I model the use of the word ‘I’ on that of the demonstrative ‘this person’ or ‘he’” (Wittgenstein 1972, 68). But this seems to show that here we have a case, where the first person pronoun is used in order to refer to a particular

person. And there are certainly situations where someone wants to inform, say a doctor, about his physical conditions or insists on being the first to be helped because he is in serious pain whereas all the others are only slightly injured. It is important to notice, however, that the I is not reducible to a particular body for I could, e.g., imagine to change my body. Nonetheless, the expression has no sense without reference to a body (cf. Ambrose 1979, 62). This point reminds one of Wittgenstein's discussion of mental predicates. Here, too, he argues that they cannot be replaced by a behaviouristic terminology although they get their sense only by reference to corresponding observable phenomena.

The second use we might call “quasi-expressive”. What characterizes these cases of “I”-applications is the assumption that first person predications are not to be taken as descriptions of certain conditions but rather as substitutions of natural expressions such as “ouch” in the case of “I am in pain”, or as Wittgenstein puts it: “To say, ‘I have pain’ is no more a statement about a particular person than moaning is” (Wittgenstein 1972, 67) or “The difference between the propositions ‘I have pain’ and ‘he has pain’ is not that of ‘L.W. has pain’ and ‘Smith has pain’. Rather, it corresponds to the difference between moaning and saying that someone moans” (Wittgenstein 1972, 68). Here we can see that this form of subjective use is modeled on contexts of non-descriptive natural expressions, i.e. cases where the question of reference does not arise because no referential terms are involved.

The third and most interesting case of metaphysical usage, however, does not, it seems, correspond to any analogous applications of the above kinds. But as already mentioned, the fact that we apply the word “I” without recognizing a particular person by her bodily features might create the illusion, that instead we indirectly refer to some mental Cartesian substance that *justifies* our saying “I”. What is most important here to see is not the denial of such a self but rather that it cannot warrant the use of our first person pronoun. Wittgenstein remarks: “– ‘Is there then no mind, but only a body?’ Answer: The word ‘mind’ has meaning, i.e., it has a use in our language; but saying this doesn't yet say what kind of use we make of it” (Wittgenstein 1972, 69). Although this remark does not tell us what kind of use Wittgenstein is appealing to, it seems clear that the meaning of the word “I” in metaphysical contexts is not some bearer it denotes.

Now, to avoid the semantic dichotomy between empirical and metaphysical contexts, Wittgenstein offers a possible solution by introducing a new conceptual framework based on a set of rules different from our everyday usage.

3. Introduction of an alternative symbolism

A solipsist who argues that only his pain is real pain is certainly not stating a matter of fact for his point is that it is *logically* impossible for anyone except him to be in pain, or in other words, a sentence that claims that a person A, who is not the solipsist, feels pain is without meaning. In these metaphysical contexts, where the “I” is without a counterpart, it is, however, equally nonsense to say that I am in pain, for here the use of the first person pronoun is not a quasi-objective one, i.e. it does not refer to any pos-

sensor having a particular experience as it does in cases of objective use such as "I have 5 Euro in my pocket". In one of his lectures Wittgenstein mentions the following: "To the person who says 'only I have real toothache' the reply should be: 'If only you can have real toothache, there is no sense in saying 'Only I have toothache'. Either you don't need 'I' or you don't need 'real' ... 'I' is no longer opposed to anything. You had much better say 'There is toothache.' 'Only I have real toothache', either has a commonsense meaning, or, if it is a grammatical proposition it is meant to be a statement of a rule" (Ambrose 1979, 22). This last remark obviously points out the meaning ambiguity that is involved in sentences stating personal experiences. Under usual circumstances the one who says that only she is in pain implies that all the others are just pretending. The second part of the quote, however, hints at another problem Wittgenstein ascribes to metaphysical propositions: Whereas the solipsist wants to say something necessarily true about the nature of things, e.g., the soul, all he really does is confusing such statements with grammatical rules that govern the use of words like "I". So, the sentence 'Only I have real pain' is not to be taken as a metaphysical claim about the essence of a self but instead as a grammatical sentence determining the use of our first person pronoun in such contexts.

In his *Notes for Lectures on 'Private Experience' and 'Sense Data'* Wittgenstein remarks: "You can't deny that there is my personal experience and that this in a most important sense *has no neighbour*. – But you don't mean that it *happens* to be alone but that its grammatical position is that of having no neighbour" (Wittgenstein 1993, 229). Here again, we see the distinction between an empirical context where someone happens to be by himself accidentally as opposed to a case where the *use of a word*, say "I", does not have an equivalent counterpart. In the same notes Wittgenstein points out that this asymmetry in our way of speaking misleads us in assuming a similar case for the nature of things, e.g., a Cartesian Ego, as if language functioned as a kind of mirror image of our world (cf. Wittgenstein 1993, 208-209), a position that reminds us of the famous Tractarian Picture theory.

Wittgenstein's view that metaphysical statements are indeed nothing but grammatical sentences about the use of words that differs from our commonsense understanding allows him to introduce the idea of an alternative symbolism in order to avoid such meaning ambiguities. What he therefore proposes is a symbolism where the first person pronoun is omitted from utterances containing self-referential mental ascriptions. So instead of saying, e.g., "I am in pain" or "I think" we could just as well say "There is pain here" or "it thinks", for such changes in our symbolism do not leave anything out at all: "The solipsist wishes to say 'I should like to put, instead of the notation 'I have real toothache' 'There is toothache'.' What the solipsist wants is not a notation in which the ego has a monopoly, but one in which the ego vanishes" (Ambrose 1979, 22).

A famous objection that obviously neglects the idea of such an alternative rule symbolism goes something like this: "To say that there is pain here does not at all tell one who the suffering person is. What this notation lacks is the identification of mental experiences as belonging to the speaker who would usually utter: 'I am in pain'. Only to say that there is pain here could mean that anyone might suffer who is close enough to the talking person. "

Of course, in our *ordinary* way of communication a sentence such as "There's pain here" makes no sense for the just mentioned reasons. But what is important to notice is that the alternative symbolism is only introduced for meta-

physical contexts in order to avoid possible meaning ambiguities. Therefore a new set of linguistic rules is introduced that contains grammatical propositions like "Only I have real pain", "Only my experiences are real" etc. On the basis of these rules it is, however, absolutely clear towards what person a sentence like "There is pain here" is directed to, namely the speaker of such an utterance who would commonly say "I am in pain". This is just because the rules determine that there *can* only be one person suffering. Hence expressions such as "I" or "real" are indeed superfluous, or in other words, if there is only one candidate for applying a particular rule to, any mentioning *in* applying it is futile. When in a chess book we read "b1-c3" or "b1-a3" we would never object that the indication of this move is incomplete because it does not tell us what figure is supposed to make it. And this is because according to the rules of chess there is only one piece that is allowed to move in such a way, i.e. the horse.

In one of his lectures, Wittgenstein remarks the following: "We think we describe phenomena incompletely if we leave out personal pronouns, as though we would thus omit pointing to something, the personality, which 'I' in our present language points to. But this is not so. One symbolism is just as good as the next. The word 'I' is one symbol among others having a *practical* use and could be discarded when not necessary for practical speech. It does not stand out among all other words we use in practical life unless we begin using it as Descartes did" (Ambrose 1979, 63). Here again, Wittgenstein emphasizes the misleading temptation to assume that because in using the word "I" we do not point to a particular body we instead refer to some kind of Cartesian Ego seated somewhere in our body. His proposal of an alternative symbolism is obviously an attempt to avoid such inclinations by eliminating the word "I" in contexts where one does not want to claim anything empirical. The reason why Wittgenstein argues that this symbolism is as good as any other is precisely the fact that a mental substance cannot work as a justification for applying the first person pronoun. This is a point that generally holds for any rules, i.e. they are arbitrary in the sense that they are not justifiable by anything in reality (cf. Moore 1993, 70pp.). Wittgenstein remarks: "There is nothing wrong in suggesting that the others should give me an exceptional place in their notation; but the justification which I wish to give for it: that this body is now the seat of that which really lives – is senseless. For admittedly this is not to state anything which in the ordinary sense is a matter of experience" (Wittgenstein 1972, 66).

Hence, it is important to notice that the whole conception of an alternative symbolism is not to deny anything like mental states or substances which would imply that expressions referring to them are nonsensical but rather that the sense of such expressions is not determined by any entity they do or do not refer to. So, to say that the word "mind" has a meaning is not to say that it refers to a mind that justifies its use. What gives the word its meaning is the particular context in which it is applied and to say, e.g., that other people have a self might mean that they are alive (cf. Ambrose 1979, 62).

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