

The First Person and “The First Person”

Harold Noonan

Abstract:

The ~~first person~~ In “The First Person” Anscombe argues that “I” is not a referring expression: “I” is neither ~~nor~~ a name nor another kind of expression whose logical role is to make a reference, *at all*. Her no-reference thesis has met with general incredulity. ~~This~~ chapter examines Anscombe’s argument ~~and~~ concludes, with the majority of commentators, that she is wrong to maintain this thesis. “I” is a referring expression and should be grouped specifically with the pure or automatic indexicals, including “here” and “now.” But it is a consequence that self-reference (i.e., the self-conscious and successful use of “I”) need not involve what she describes as “the connection of what is understood by a predicate with a *distinctly* conceived subject.” That is, in intending to refer to themselves (to use “I” in accordance with its customary meaning) speakers need not form an intention to refer to the such-and-such, when “such-and-such” provides an identification of the speaker, which singles out the speaker ~~out~~ from everything else. It is a further consequence that “I” is not guaranteed a reference and that a thinker of an “I”-thought need not be the reference of the thought even if there is one. In arguing these points, ~~I am the~~ chapter follows ing Evans and will appeal to work by Snowdon and Lewis. To a considerable extent ~~I think~~ this vindicates Anscombe.

Keywords: Anscombe, Evans, Lewis, Wittgenstein, the first person, reference, names, descriptions, demonstratives, immunity to misidentification

18.1

In her famous (or infamous) paper “The First Person” Anscombe argues that “I” is not a referring expression: “I” is neither a name nor any other kind of expression whose logical role is to make a reference, *at all*.¹ She does so by arguing that if “I” were a referring expression it would have to be one whose reference was a stretch of a Cartesian Ego—an intolerable conclusion. But she also argues in addition that the first-person pronoun is not a referring expression because it manifestly does not function as one, so anyone tempted to grasp the Cartesian nettle cannot feel complacent.

Her position is obviously influenced by Wittgenstein, but it appears that she goes further than he does, at least in his published writings, and she does not appeal explicitly to the distinction he makes, which seems highly relevant, between the use of “I” as object and the use of “I” as subject. (It does appear that Wittgenstein thinks that in its use “as object” “I” does have the role of referring, but in its use “as subject” this is not so.)

Her no-reference thesis has met with general incredulity. Two examples: one from van Inwagen:

Professor Anscombe’s position is that it is not the function of the word “I” to refer. The word is thus unlike “the present King of France,” which is in the denoting business but is a failure at it; rather the word, despite the fact that it can be the subject of a verb *is*, is not in the denoting business at all.

¹ <<<REFO:BKCH>> G. E. M. Anscombe, “The First Person,” in *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe: Volume II*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1981), 32, <<<REFC>>

Commented [jah1]: AU: please supply name of editor; or use abbreviation FP in list in frontmatter and delete note and entry in biblio here

Commented [HN(2R1)]: Use FP

for Anscombe the word “I” refers to nothing in a way like the way in which “if” and “however” refer to nothing.²

Strawson writes:

It is simply an error to separate, as Miss Anscombe implicitly does, the semantics of the use of “I” sentences from the question whether the use of “I” is referential, and the question of what reference it makes. What McDowell generously describes as “the beginning of wisdom” on this question is also its end; though it would be better to replace the lofty word “wisdom” with something more modest like “plain sense” (except that they often in philosophy come to much the same thing). Seriously to question whether, in any standard use of “I” a person is referring to him or herself is as futile as seriously to question whether in any standard use of “now” as a temporal adverb a person is referring to a (more or less extended) present.³

Most who discuss Anscombe’s paper interpret her as denying that “I” is a referring expression and reject her thesis, though a few (Wiseman,⁴ Doyle⁵) dissent.

² Peter van Inwagen, “‘I am Elizabeth Anscombe’ is Not an Identity Proposition,” *Metaphysica* (2) no. 1 (2001): 6.

³ Peter Strawson, “Reply to John McDowell,” in *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson*, Lewis Hahn (ed.) (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, La Salle Illinois 1998), 149.

⁴ Rachael Wiseman, “What am I and What am I Doing?” *The Journal of Philosophy* (114) no. 10 (2017): 536–550.

⁵ James Doyle, *No Morality, No Self: Anscombe’s Radical Skepticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

I shall examine Anscombe's argument. I shall not dissent from the majority view that Anscombe maintains the no-reference thesis, and I shall conclude, also with the majority, that she is wrong to do so. "I" is a referring expression and should be grouped specifically with the pure or automatic indexicals, including "here" and "now." But it is a consequence that self-reference (i.e., the self-conscious and successful use of "I") need not involve "the connection of what is understood by a predicate with a *distinctly* conceived subject."⁶ That is, in intending to refer to himself (to use "I" in accordance with its customary meaning) a speaker need not form an intention to refer to the such-and-such, when "such-and-such" provides an identification of the speaker, which singles him out from everything else. It is a further consequence that "I" is not guaranteed a reference and that a thinker of an "I"-thought need not be the reference of the thought even if there is one. In arguing these points, I am following Evans⁷ and will appeal to work by Snowdon⁸ and Lewis.⁹ To a considerable extent I think this vindicates Anscombe.

[H18.2](#)

I begin with a discussion of referring expressions.

⁶ Anscombe, FP, 36.

⁷ <<<REFO:BK>> Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982 <<<REFC>>).

⁸ <<<REFO:BK>> Paul Snowdon, *Persons, Animals, Ourselves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014 <<<REFC>>).

⁹ <<<REFO:BKCH>> David Lewis, "Survival and Identity" in *The Identities of Persons*, Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 17–

40 <<<REFC>>.

Anscombe's no-reference thesis is that "I" is not a name or "any other expression" which has a referring role. In her first paragraph she writes that "in these writers [Descartes and St. Augustine] there is an assumption that when one says "I" one is naming something such that the knowledge of its existence, which is knowledge of itself as thinking in all the various modes, determines what it is that is known to exist."¹⁰

The first category of referring expression to which Anscombe denies "I" belonging to is thus that of proper names. Of course, since Kripke's revolution proper names have been a subject of huge controversy. But Anscombe is assuming a Fregean viewpoint. She writes: "If "I" expresses a way its object is reached by him [its user], what Frege calls an "Art des Gebenseins," we want to know what that way is. [T]his is to treat "I" as a sort of proper name."¹¹ Again:

If "I" is supposed to stand for its object as a name does we need an account of a certain kind. The use of a name of an object is connected with a conception of that object as the conception of a city is [related] to the names "London" and "Chicago," that of a river to "Thames" and "Nile," that of a man to "John" and "Pat." That is why some philosophers have elaborated the notion of "selves." And just as we need to be continuing our reference to the same city if we continue to use "London" with the same reference, so we must each of us be continuing our reference to the same self if we continue to use "I" with the same reference.¹²

¹⁰ Anscombe-FP, 21.

¹¹ Anscombe-FP, 13.

¹² Anscombe-FP, 26.

On the account from Kripke a competent user of a proper name need have no knowledge at all of its bearer, certainly no identifying knowledge, no way of reaching it and it alone. By contrast, Anscombe's position is that a competent use of a name requires identifying knowledge of its bearer (though perhaps this can differ from user to user), including knowledge of the sort of thing it is. So if $\langle F, I \rangle$ is a name, then if a user of it knows anything he can express in the form " $\langle I \rangle$ am such-and such" (e.g., " $\langle I \rangle$ am a thinker") he must know something non-trivial he can express in the form " $\langle I \rangle$ am *the* such-and-such." A substantial part of Anscombe's argument is that if one can refer to an object, oneself, using $\langle F, I \rangle$ at all, one must be able to do so even when one has no such knowledge—unless one is a stretch of a Cartesian Ego. So either $\langle F, I \rangle$ is not a name, or we are stretches of Cartesian Egos.

Of course, this leaves room for a Kripkean to accept Anscombe's main claim about the possible use of $\langle F, I \rangle$ in the absence of identifying knowledge while holding that $\langle F, I \rangle$ is nonetheless a referring expression and indeed a proper name, linked to its bearer by a causal-historical connection. But this is hardly an attractive view. There was no initial baptism in which I " $\langle I \rangle$ fixed the reference" of my use of $\langle F, I \rangle$ by a reference-fixing description with subsequent uses causally linked to that baptismal event. Even if the Kripkean view of proper names is correct, then, it does not provide a plausible alternative to Anscombe's no-reference thesis about the first person.

The second category of referring expression to which Anscombe draws attention is that of definite descriptions. Her dismissal of the suggestion that $\langle F, I \rangle$ belongs to that category is blunt. The only serious candidate for such an account is " $\langle I \rangle$ the sayer of this."

where “sayer” implies “thinker.” But “How could one justify the assumption that there is just one thinking which is the thinking of this thought — just one thinker?”¹³

The third category of referring expression Anscombe explicitly considers is that of demonstratives. Again, as in the case of proper names, she insists that the use of a demonstrative requires a conception of its object, an answer to the question “This what?” and that given that “I” can have reference even in cases of sensory deprivation (and total amnesia), as her opponents assume, its reference, if it is assimilated to demonstratives, must be a stretch of a Cartesian Ego, since nothing else can be “present to me” in such a situation.

So, notable by their omission from Anscombe’s list are the pure, or automatic indexicals, which are neither names nor descriptions, nor even demonstratives, since their use requires no accompanying demonstration. This seems to be a huge omission, since this is the obvious grouping: “I” goes with “here” and “now.” But Anscombe’s first argument in her paper has, if sound, the consequence that this grouping is incorrect, and I think is intended to do so. It is, I believe, unsound. Nevertheless, I shall argue, as indicated earlier, that if we endorse this grouping we should accept that “I,” though it can have reference, is not guaranteed to do so, which is Anscombe’s main point. In some circumstances (as in the case of “here” and “now”) there will be too many eligible referents for a token utterance of “I” and no identifying intention to single just one out. So though an “I”-utterance can have a unique reference it need not always do so, and its use by a thinker need not involve a reference to that thinker; neither of these things has to be the case for a linguistically competent and successful use of “I”—just as an utterance of “here” within a region need not have a reference at all, and if it has it need not be to that region.

¹³ Anscombe-FP, 3.

III.18.3

The first argument Anscombe gives for her no-referring thesis is that the tempting idea that “I” can be explained as “the word each one uses in speaking of himself” faces a dilemma: either circular or incorrect. It is circular if the reflexive pronoun in the dictum is “a special one which can only be explained in terms of the first person”—the indirect reflexive. It is incorrect if it is the ordinary reflexive.

The ordinary reflexive occurs in “Cato killed himself,” which is equivalent to “Cato killed Cato.” It also occurs, Anscombe notes, in “When John Smith spoke of John Horatio Auberon Smith (named in a will perhaps) he was speaking of himself, but he did not know this.” When “himself” is the ordinary reflexive “John Smith was speaking of himself” follows from “John Smith was speaking of John Smith,” which in turn follows from “John Smith was speaking of JHAS and John Smith = JHAS.” But in these circumstances John Smith does not know that *he himself* is JHAS; that is, he does not know what he would express by “I am JHAS.” This last occurrence of “himself” is the indirect reflexive. It identifies for us what John Smith does not know: it is “I am JHAS.” When the reflexive in the report is the ordinary one, by contrast, as in “John Smith (reading the will out loud) spoke of himself but did not know this,” we are not told under what conception the *mind* of the subject of the report latches on to its object (himself).¹⁴

So, Anscombe argues, if the reflexive in the dictum “I” is the word each one uses to speak of himself is the indirect reflexive, which can ~~only~~ be explained only in terms of the first-person, we have only a viciously circular account of “I”; not an explanation of its meaning. That is, the dictum so read does not tell us how its meaning differs from that of other referring expressions.

¹⁴ Anscombe-FP, 23.

What of the other horn of the dilemma? Anscombe says that if in “It’s the word each one uses in speaking of himself” “himself” is the ordinary reflexive, this cannot explain what “I” means, thought of as a referring expression. And, if so, she adds, it will be no use to expand the dictum to: “It is the word each one uses when knowingly and intentionally speaking of himself.” “For did not Smith knowingly and intentionally speak of Smith? Was not the person he intended to speak of—Smith? And so was not the person he intended to speak of—himself?”¹⁵

The addition is completely convincing. But the initial argument for this horn of the dilemma (that is, that if “himself” in the dictum is the ordinary reflexive it cannot explain what “I” means thought of as a referring expression) is open to challenge.

First, we must note that the dictum is anyway false, as stated. Everyone speaks of himself using other words. Some people do so quite a lot—De Gaulle, the Queen, Margaret Thatcher—and some people could conceivably avoid “I” or any equivalent construction completely. So the dictum is better expressed: Whenever someone uses “I” he speaks of himself. If “himself” here is the ordinary reflexive this is equivalent to: For any person x, when x uses “I,” x refers to x. In this no reflexive pronoun occurs. But this does seem to distinguish the meaning of “I” from that of any other pronoun, name, or description. Comparable dicta: “for any place p, an utterance of ‘here’ at that place refers to p” and “for any time t, an utterance of ‘now’ at t refers to t.” This is why it seems correct to group “I” with “here” and “now.”

IV.18.4

Having satisfied herself that “I” cannot be explained either by way of the ordinary or by way of the indirect reflexive, and thus, I think, in her own mind having ruled out its grouping

¹⁵ Anscombe-FP, 22.

with the pure indexicals, Anscombe next turns to the proposal that it is a sort of proper name, one that everyone has but uses only of himself.

She first considers the suggestion that her thesis that ‘I’ is not a proper name “seems to reduce to the triviality that we perhaps would not call a word a proper name if everyone had it and used it only to speak of himself.”¹⁶ That is, that ‘I’ is “only not called a proper name *because* everyone uses it only to refer himself.”

The purpose of her parable of the “A”-users is to establish that this is not so. ‘A’ is supposed to be an example of an expression which each one uses to refer to himself and no one else which is *clearly* a proper name.¹⁷ I think that Anscombe’s use of this parable does establish this point. But there is a variation of the parable (which I introduced below later) in which ‘A’, while not a proper name, is a referring expression. The actual use of ‘I’ is closer to that of ‘A’ in this variation than in Anscombe’s original. Yet in this variation (as in the original) an ‘A’-user is not guaranteed by a linguistically competent and successful use of ‘A’ to refer to himself. This variation illustrates how an expression analogous to ‘I’ may not have a guaranteed reference and yet be a referring expression (i.e., one capable of reference)—the option in the case of ‘I’ dismissed by Anscombe and most of her opponents and which I will argue for below.

Anscombe’s parable runs as follows:

Imagine a society in which everyone is labelled with two names. One appears on their backs and the top of their chests, and these names, which their bearers cannot see, are various, “B” to “Z” say. The other, ‘A’, is stamped on the inside of their wrists and is the same for everyone. In making reports on

¹⁶ Anscombe-FP, 23–24.

¹⁷ Anscombe-FP, 24.

Commented [jah3]: AU: where does this quote start?

Commented [HN(4R3)]: Delete the quotation marks. This sentence is a paraphrase

Formatted: EXT

people's actions everyone uses the names on their chests or backs if they can see these names or are used to seeing them. Everyone also learns to respond to utterances of the name on his own chest and back in the sort of way and circumstances in which we tend to respond to utterances of our own names.

Reports on one's own actions, which are given straight off from observation, are made using the name on the wrist. Such reports are made, not on the basis of observation alone, but also on that of inference and testimony or other information. "B," for example, derives conclusions expressed by sentences with "A" as subject, from other people's statements using "B" as subject.

Anscombe goes on:

Thus for each person there is one person of whom he has characteristically limited and also characteristically privileged views: except in mirrors he never sees the whole person, and can only get rather special views of what he does see. Some of these are specially good, others specially bad. Of course, a man, B, may sometimes make a mistake through seeing the name "A" on the wrist of another, and not realising that it is the wrist of a man whose other name is after all not inaccessible to B in the special way in which his own name ("B") is.

It seems clear that "A" in this society is, as Anscombe says, a name, albeit one which is the same for everyone but used by each person only to refer only to himself (that is to say, there may be occasions when B, say, uses "A" to speak of someone other than B, but such uses of "A" will be *mistakes, misuses* of "A"). For it is evidently Anscombe's intention that the sense of "A" in B's mouth should be such that "B" can correctly use "A" only to speak of something: (i) of which he gets the special view she speaks of *and*

Commented [jah5]: AU: please cite source and page number of quote

Commented [HN(6R5)]: FP page 24

Commented [jah7]: AU: please cite source and page

Commented [HN(8R7)]: FP afe 24

(ii) of which the sense of the name “B” is a mode of presentation. This explains why she thinks the use of “A” involves reidentification.¹⁸

The idea is that for some reason “A”-users do not, or perhaps cannot, use their public names to refer to themselves. Each must substitute for a statement he would make using his public name an equivalent statement with “A” replacing it. So B can infer from other statements about him a conclusion he expresses with “A” as subject, and he can also make assertions with “A” as subject on the basis of observation of features of that person of whom he has a characteristically special view. But such assertions may be mistaken if, as can happen, another person happens to be one of which he has on this occasion a special view.

But now consider my variation of the fantasy. Consider first why Brown’s using “I” to refer to Smith is wrong. Is it because Brown is then referring to someone other than Brown with “I”? No. Telling him that will not necessarily enlighten him. For Brown might not know that he is named “Brown” and still be able to use “I” correctly. Brown has *learned* to respond to utterances of the name “Brown” in the appropriate way, but it is no part of his understanding of “I” that he recognize that in his mouth it is equivalent to “Brown.”

Let us imagine, then, that it is no part of the understanding of “A” that it is required of B that he assent to “B is A.” What is required of B to show a grasp of the meaning of “A” is merely that he recognize he must *only* use “A” *only* to refer to that item of which he gets the limited and privileged views Anscombe talks about. Now that item is B himself. So it looks as if “A” in this variation of Anscombe’s story, is an expression which is necessarily used by each person to refer to himself, while yet being such that for any

¹⁸ Anscombe-FP, 27.

member of the society when “N” is that person’s public name, “A is N” may be something he does not know.

However, this can ~~only~~ be maintained only if it is really the case that, for example, B would be necessarily using “A” incorrectly if he were to use it to refer to C. But this is not so. For that B is the object of which B gets a special view is not a necessary fact, but a consequence of the nature of B’s perceptual apparatus. If this were tampered with so that the view B previously got of B he now got of C—and this is especially easy to imagine if we think, as Anscombe suggests, of the “A”-users as machines rather than people—there would be no mistake in B’s using “A” to refer to C. In so using it, in fact, he would be using it in just the way he was obliged to in order to use it correctly, given its meaning. (We can, of course, speak of the meaning of “A”, and its sense in someone’s mouth, in this variant of Anscombe’s story.) This becomes obvious once it is realized that there would be no way of explaining to B the mistake he was making in using “A”. Before B was tampered with, if he asserted “F(A)” as a result of misidentifying someone else as “A”, one could show him that that person was not the one of which he had a special view, hence not the one of which the sense of “A” as used by him, was a mode of presentation. But after B has been tampered with, if he asserts “F(A)” as a result of observing that F(C), what can one say to him? To tell him that he is B is no help since he no longer believes that he is B; i.e., he no longer assents to “A is B”. To tell him “You are not C” (given that in this society “You” is governed by the rule that “You are F” addressed to X is true if and only if X can correctly assert “A is F”) will not help since if he checks (i.e., checks whether or not he should assent to “A is C”), he will find that he should. And there is just nothing else to say to him.

Philosophers, attempting to explain “I” as a sort of referring expression, sometimes suggest that ~~is-it~~ is equivalent to “this self”. But the idea is not that any legitimate use of

“this self” is equivalent to a use of “I.” Rather it is that “I” is correctly used if it is used in the way “this self” would be used if it were used by any self only to refer to that self presented to it in inner perception.¹⁹ They then face the task of explaining why no self can have an inner perception of any other self—since, according to their account of the meaning of “I,” any self of which a self has an inner perception, whether or not it is itself, is a self it can correctly refer to with “I.” The defender of the position that “A” can only be used correctly in our variant of Anscombe’s story only if it is used to refer to its user faces the analogous task of explaining why it is impossible for C to be so presented to B that B would be correct in using “A” to refer to C—except that in this case it clearly is possible.

So “A” as used in my variation of Anscombe’s parable is not a proper name. Unlike “A” in the original parable, reidentification is not involved in its use. In order to determine whether a mistake has been made in using “A” no recourse is needed to what is the case at a time other than the time of utterance of “A.” If B should say “A has a broken leg” he can be shown to be mistaken by showing that the body of which he is capable of a special view has no broken leg. By contrast, since the reference of a proper name

¹⁹ As Anscombe points out, the intelligible use of demonstrative pronouns does not require the presence of a referent but only the presence of something to latch on to. I may utter “these ashes,” meaning the ones in the urn, though I do not see the ashes but only the urn. The ashes, if they exist, are my referent, but what my utterance latches on to is the urn. In the same way I could use “this self” to refer to the self connected to a particular body, even if that self was not an object of perception for me, but only the body. In the use of “this self” which is imagined by philosophers to be equivalent to “I,” however, the referent and what the utterance latches on to have to be identical; i.e., the referent has to be present to consciousness—and present, moreover, in a certain special way.

is that object which at a certain time fulfilled a certain condition, to establish whether a mistake has been made in using a proper name may require recourse to what is the case at a time other than the time of utterance of the name.

So ‘A’ in my variation of Anscombe’s story is not a proper name, since its use does not involve reidentification, yet it is a referring expression though it does not have a guaranteed reference. The same, I will argue, is true of ‘I’.

¶18.5

After considering the idea that ‘I’ is a proper name Anscombe turns next to the idea that it is a sort of demonstrative expression (like ‘A’ in the variant of the parable).

But at this point she appeals to the “guaranteed reference” of ‘I’ is supposed to have to argue that if this assimilation is made the referent of ‘I’ must be a Cartesian Ego.

A consequence of the “guaranteed reference” of ‘I’ she is supposing is that I can only ever use ‘I’ correctly to refer to myself. Hence that I must always use it to refer to the same thing. In this respect ‘I’ is unlike the variant use of ‘A’ I have explained and like the use of a proper name.

But, if so, how can it function as a demonstrative? How can it be thus both like ‘A’ in the variant story and like a proper name? It seems, Anscombe says, that this reference could ~~only~~ be sure-fire only if the referent of ‘I’ were both freshly defined with each use, and also remained in view so that nothing else was ever taken to be ‘I’.

But consider how this could be. It has to be maintained that the “inner sense” by which I can perceive myself qua thinking thing is necessarily restricted in its scope to myself—or to my own thoughts (if I am to be thought of as latching on to them primarily and think of myself via the demonstrative-including-description “the thinker of these thoughts”). But how might such a restriction in range be understood?

Commented [jah9]: AU: words seem to be missing here; it is not a complete sentence

Commented [HN(10R9)]: Insert the word "which" before first occurrence of "I"

It is tempting to think that one cannot be acquainted with another's self or thoughts in the way he is because there is a sort of barrier, opaque to one's inner sense, behind which he and his thoughts lie. But we cannot take this thought seriously. What cannot be seen because it lies behind a barrier could be seen if the barrier was down. But we do not want to allow the possibility of any circumstances in which we could know the thoughts of another in the way that he knows them.

Another idea that comes to mind is that we should think of the impossibility of knowing another's thought in the way he does by analogy with the impossibility of seeing sound or hearing colors. According to this idea, the reason why my inner sense cannot be extended in its range beyond my own thoughts is that my own thoughts constitute the entire class of its proper objects. But this entails that there are as many kinds of inner sense as there are individual thinkers, and that my thoughts, your thoughts, and a third person's thoughts have no more in common than a color, a sound, and a smell. Why, then, are they all called "thoughts"? And how can this be so if we are all the same kind of thinking thing?

One possibility remains, suggested by Anscombe's reference to "an imaginative tour de force on the part of Locke": might not the thinking substance which thought the thought "I did it"—the genuine thought of agent memory—nonetheless be a different thinking substance from the one that could have had the thought "I am doing it" when the act was done? "Thus he detached the identity of the self or 'person'" from the identity even of the thinking being which does the actual thinking of the 'I'-thoughts.²⁰ According to Locke, in this circumstance, though one thinking substance recalls what another did, this makes the two thinking substances one person. Locke was thinking of diachronic identity only, but his idea may be applied to synchronic identity too. One might maintain that this is the reason why one

²⁰ Anscombe-FP, 26.

person cannot perceive by inner sense another person or his thoughts: any other thinking substance to whose thoughts a thinking substance has access by inner sense thereby counts as the same person as the given thinking substance—whether or not it is the same substance.

(Perhaps, as Anscombe puts it, “I am ten thinkers thinking in unison, or perhaps not quite succeeding. That might account for the confusion of thought which I sometimes feel.”)²¹

However, this proposal can help to explain how my inner sense is necessarily restricted in its range to my own thoughts only if my own thoughts = the thoughts of whatever is the same person as me. But this is so only if what I am is essentially a person. So the proposal does not explain how my inner sense can be necessarily restricted in its range to my own thoughts if what I am essentially is a thinking substance—or a human being. All it comes to is a stipulation that if I perceive by inner sense the thoughts of another thinking substance or human being he must be called the same person as me. But this plainly gets us nowhere.

So we come to Anscombe’s conclusion, which is not yet that “I” is not a referring expression, but that if it is, I am not a human being or a thinking substance but “a Cartesian Ego.” Or rather, a stretch of one. People have sometimes queried how Descartes could conclude to his RES cogitans. But this is to forget that Descartes declares its essence to be nothing but thinking. The thinking that thinks this thought—that is what is guaranteed by “cogito.”²²

Anscombe arrives at this conclusion on the basis of her famous Tank Argument:

Let us suppose that [what “I” stands for is some other object than a stretch of a Cartesian Ego]. A plausible candidate would be *this body*. And now

²¹ Anscombe-FP, 32.

²² Anscombe-FP, 31.

imagine that I get into a state of “sensory deprivation.” Sight is cut off, and I am locally anaesthetized everywhere, perhaps floated in a tank of tepid water. I am unable to speak or to touch any part of my body with any other. Now I tell myself, “I won’t let this happen again!” If the object meant by “I” is this body, this human being, then in these circumstances it won’t be present to my senses, and how else can it be “present” to me? But have I lost what I meant by “I”? Is that not present to me? Am I reduced to, as it were, referring in absence? I have not lost my self-consciousness; nor can what I mean by “I” be an object no longer present to me. This seems both right in itself, and will be required by the guaranteed reference we are considering.

For good measure, we can also assume that Anscombe has lost all knowledge of what she has done. In this situation she can have no way of identifying herself—if she is a human being, and indeed if she is not. No object, not even substantial Cartesian Ego, is present to her. Yet she can still, as she says, think first-personal thoughts. She has not lost what she means by “I.”

Her argument is, I think, completely persuasive if directed against the thesis that “I” is analogous to a demonstrative (or “A,” as used in my variation of her parable). But it is completely unpersuasive if we take it as directed against the thesis that “I” is any sort of referring expression, since the underlying presupposition is that “I” can only be a referring expression only if it is a proper name, description, or demonstrative. The possibility that “I” is to be grouped with the pure indexicals is not considered. But in order to use “here” I need have no information from my environment. So if “I” is grouped with the pure indexicals, Anscombe’s argument falls flat. Of course, I think that this would not disturb her since I think that the first argument in the paper, the circularity argument, is meant to rule out the possibility that “I” is a pure indexical. But I have claimed that this argument is

Commented [jah11]: AU: please cite source and page

Commented [HN(12R11)]: FP page 31

unpersuasive. So we are back to the beginning. For all Anscombe has said, we can say that what distinguishes “I” from other referring expressions is that it is governed by the rule that for any x, if x uses “I” x refers to x.

VI 18.6

But the game is not yet over. For if we accept the assimilation of “I” to the pure indexicals, we have no reason to insist that “I” has a guaranteed reference. In fact, we need not accept that any expression can, in virtue of its meaning, be such that if x uses it x must refer to x, irrespective of any knowledge x has other than of its meaning,

Actually, this point is evident in the cases of “here” and “now.” Where is here? What place? Places are, as Gareth Evans once said,²³ just too thick on the ground for there to be an answer unless when I wrote that question I had some identifying description in mind. (I didn’t.) The same is true of “now.” Perhaps “I” should perhaps be compared instead with “today,” since as uttered now by me it does pick out a particular period, if we understand it as the period between the last previous and the next period of darkness. But “today” is not guaranteed a reference either. It will not necessarily have one uttered at daybreak or sunset—utterances take time.

These remarks will seem obvious and irrelevant since persons are not divisible or composable like places and times. But this misses the main point. Situations are possible in which persons overlap, and in these situations a thinker of an “I”-thought is not guaranteed a reference to itself unless we insist on describing them in ways that have no justification except that they ensure a guaranteed reference for any I-user’s use of “I.” In this way, I think, Anscombe is substantially vindicated.

²³ Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 169.

The first case I have in mind is appealed to by Snowdon.²⁴ People think, and they do so in virtue of their brain activity; damage to the brain will destroy the capacity for thought, not so for damage to many other and larger organs. This is an empirical fact, which might not have been so. People can also be severely mutilated, whittled down to not much more than a brain, and continue to be conscious thinking things. Again, this might not have been so. Because of these facts it seems not unacceptable to say that brains think and that they think the thoughts of the people whose brains they are. Some philosophers are reluctant to say that brains think, but there seems to be nothing categorically absurd in saying that my brain is thinking. But if it is, when I am thinking about myself my brain is thinking in a first-person manner. (How else?) But that does not mean that it is thinking false thoughts about itself. Its thoughts will track the conditions of the animal whose brain it is. It will truly think “I am standing up” if and only if the animal whose brain it is is standing up. It will justifiably think “I am sixteen stone” if and only if the evidence presented to it is that the animal whose brain it is is sixteen stone. So there are two thinkers, but not two objects of first-person reference. We do not have to say that the brain is thinking falsely that it is a person or an animal. Its assent to “I am an animal” is correct, because its reference is to the animal, not itself.

Of course, this line of thought can be resisted. But to do so seems a kind of conventionalist sulk. To insist that brains cannot think, given what we know about them and their importance to our mental lives, does not seem to be an insistence on a matter of fact. But if this way of speaking is allowed, it is hard to dismiss this line of thought. For how could two such relevantly indistinguishable thinkers as the person and his brain differ in what they are thinking of? How, as it were, could they direct their attention differently?

²⁴ Snowdon, *Persons, Animals, Ourselves*, 247.

Another situation which it does not seem wrong to describe as one in which a thinker of an “I”-thought is not the reference of that thought is the symmetrical fission case, familiar from the literature on personal identity. In this fission case, when two hemispheres from one brain are transplanted, according to the “no rival candidate” or “best candidate” neo-Lockean accounts of Shoemaker²⁵ and Parfit,²⁶ the original person ceases to exist and two new people come into existence, though if either side of the story, as it were, had been the whole story (i.e., only one hemisphere had been successfully transplanted) no one would have ceased to exist. If we reject these accounts because of this, which is to embrace the thought that whether later x is identical with earlier y cannot depend only on facts about x and y (which is a rough statement of “the Only x and y principle”; see Noonan,²⁷); we must, with Lewis,²⁸ describe fission in terms of multiple occupancy. Before the fission two persons, two conscious beings, Lefty and Righty, are coincident. They cease to be coincident with the fission, but continue to exist and continue to be conscious.

Now in this fission case so described, utterances of “I” before the transplant are not guaranteed a determinate singular reference. What is Lefty referring to when he says (simultaneously with Righty), “I am hungry”? He cannot be speaking of himself alone, since he has no way of uniquely identifying himself, no way of directing attention to himself

²⁵ <<<REFO:JART>>> Sydney Shoemaker, “Persons and Their Past,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1970): 269–285 <<<REFC>>>.

²⁶ <<<REFO:JART>>> Derek Parfit, “Personal Identity,” *Philosophical Review* 80 (1971): 3–27. <<<REFC>>>

²⁷ <<<REFO:BK>>> Harold Noonan, *Personal Identity*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2018 <<<REFC>>>).

²⁸ Lewis, “Survival and Identity.”

Formatted: Not Superscript/ Subscript

alone. Either he fails to refer or, as Lewis says, he thinks a plural thought, with the content, “We both . . .” or “At least one of us . . .”. If he does not know what is going to happen plausibly, he fails to refer.²⁹ The case is essentially no different from the following. I use “Tom,” as I think, to refer to one of my acquaintances. In fact, two identical twins, Dick and Harry, have been fooling me. Hence, if it is known that fission is going to take place, assuming the multiple occupancy story, there is no intelligible doubt that Lefty and Righty can express by uttering “I wonder whether I will go left or right.” Of course, it may be objected that the description of the fission case as involving multiple occupancy is just wrong. But this does not seem right. Even if it cannot be shown to be superior to the “best candidate” story, it is hardly to be considered a matter of fact that it is just incorrect. But then it is not just (flatly) correct to say that any utterance of “I” has a guaranteed reference. Just as “here” has no determinate reference when uttered (as it must be) within a multiplicity of overlapping places, so “I” may have no determinate reference when it is uttered by a multiplicity of overlapping persons.

²⁹ A single token of “I” may be produced by two speakers with different intentions so that two singular references take place. Compare the case, described by

[Mark Johnston](#) in “Hylomorphism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 103 (2006): 652–698, in which two people with differing intentions together create the ambiguous road sign “Begin Highway”—one as a name of a highway (“the [Menachem] Begin Highway”), the other as an instruction (“Start highway”). This makes sense because we can imagine the sign constructed by a single person with both intentions—who gets paid twice. But in the fission case Lefty and Righty do not have different reference-determining intentions before the fission.

Following on from this we can consider the whole cerebrum transplant case. Those who are happy to say that in fission, as a result of the separating chains of psychological continuity, two people (like two intersecting roads), are initially present, can also say, if they wish, that in this case also two people are present, one of whom persists by psychological continuity, the other by bodily continuity—these are different kinds of continuity, either sufficient for persistence, as Nozick says.³⁰ But since a whole cerebrum transplant is as good as everyday persistence, they can say, given the asymmetry absent from the fission case, the person who persists by psychological continuity (there is only one), can make a determinate singular reference to himself before the transplant. Consequently, they can say, given this asymmetry, it can be said that both thinkers make determinate singular references with “I,” though not singular references to distinct individuals (since each thinks all and only what the other thinks). So there is just one reference, and one of the two thinkers is not speaking about himself when he says “I.”

Again, to emphasize, the point is not that this is the correct description of the case. It is simply that there is nothing to show it wrong. So, once again, insisting on a description that does not involve multiple occupancy *just because* that guarantees that the reference of any “I”-thought is determinately the single thinker of that thought seems like a conventionalist sulk.

My final case is one based on the medical literature, not science-fiction. This is the possible case of conjoined twins sharing a cerebrum but not a brainstem nor any other vital

³⁰ <<<REFO:BK>>> Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981 <<<REFC>>>), Ch. 2.

organs involved in the life-processes thought to individuate organisms.³¹ It is surely not unacceptable to describe this as a case of conjoined twinning (cephalopagus). As Campbell and McMahan write:

That there would be two organisms would be suggested by the fact that they would be separable, perhaps even with technologies that already exist or will exist soon. They might, for example, be separated asymmetrically, with one taking the cranium, the cerebrum, and one each of the cerebella and brain stems, and the other taking only a cerebellum and brain stem and thus requiring an artificial cranium to house them. This would result in two self-sustaining organisms: one relevantly like a normal person, the other, without a cerebrum, relevantly like a patient in a persistent vegetative state whose cerebrum has been destroyed but who could remain biologically alive with little external support other than hydration and nutrition. Alternatively, these hypothetical cephalopagus twins might be divided symmetrically, with each taking ... one cerebral hemisphere. Each would be like a patient who has received hemispherectomy.³²

³¹ <<<REFO:BK>> W. Metz, *Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynaecology* (New York: Thieme Medical Publishers, 2001), 289–290 <<<REFC>>; see also <<<REFO:BK>> Tim Campbell and Jeff McMahan, “Animalism and the Varieties of Conjoined Twinning” in *Animalism*, Stephen Blatti and Paul Snowdon (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) <<<REFC>>

³² Campbell & McMahan, “Animalism and the Varieties of Conjoined Twinning” 248.

It does not seem incorrect to say that in this case there are two thinkers, each of which is thinking ‘I’-thoughts, but it does not seem plausible to say that either thinker will be able to make singular reference to itself or know that it was one rather than the other.

Campbell & McMahan prefer to describe the situation as one in which there are three individuals: two non-thinking organisms and one person, who is made up of the matter in the consciousness-generating area of the brain (which goes with the view that, strictly speaking, we are proper parts of organisms—functional brains, not organisms, in fact, are thinkers). Another view is that of the animalist. There are two thinkers, since two animals, each of which, accepting the guaranteed reference for ‘I’, is thinking a singular thought about itself when they simultaneously think an ‘I’-thought (like, they must say, *pace* Lewis, Lefty and Righty in the fission cases), which may be a true thought about only one of them.

Given these alternatives, as I said, it does not seem implausible to say that ‘I’ in this case, like ‘here’ in almost every situation, lacks a determinate singular reference.

[VH18.7](#)

I conclude that the thesis against which Anscombe’s paper is directed, that ‘I’ is a device of guaranteed self-reference, is not the truism most of her opponents assume. ‘I’ is a referring expression in that it can be used to make a singular reference, and is sometimes a device of self-reference. But it is not guaranteed to be either of these things. Its linguistically competent and faultless use by a thinker may involve a singular reference to another thinker, or no determinate reference at all. The successful use of ‘I’ need not involve the connection of what is understood by a predicate with a *distinctly* conceived subject.³³

Bibliography

³³ [Anscombe, FP](#), 36.

Anscombe, G. E. M. "The First Person." In *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G. E. M. Anscombe*: Volume II, 21–36. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981.

Campbell, Tim, and McMahan, Jeff. "Animalism and the Varieties of Conjoined Twinning." In *Animalism*, Stephan Blatti and Paul Snowdon (eds.), 229–252. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Doyle, James. *No Morality, No Self: Anscombe's Radical Skepticism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

Evans, Gareth. *The Varieties of Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Johnston, Mark. "Hylomorphism," *Journal of Philosophy* 103 (2006): 652–698.

Lewis, David. "Survival and Identity." In *The Identities of Persons*, Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), 17–40. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

Metz, W. *Ultrasound in Obstetrics and Gynaecology*. New York: Thieme Medical Publishers, 2001.

Noonan, Harold. *Personal Identity*, 2nd edition. London: Routledge, 2018.

Nozick, Robert. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Parfit, Derek. "Personal Identity." *Philosophical Review* 80 (1971): 3–27.

Shoemaker, Sydney. "Persons and Their Past." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1970): 269–285.

Snowdon, Paul. *Persons, Animals, Ourselves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Strawson, Peter. "Reply to John McDowell." In *The Philosophy of P. F. Strawson*, Lewis Hahn Rorty (ed.), 146–150. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, La Salle Illinois, 1998.

van Inwagen, Peter. "I am Elizabeth Anscombe" Is Not an Identity Proposition." *Metaphysica* (2) 2, no. 1 (2001): 5–8.

Commented [jah13]: AU: please provide name of editor; or delete entry and rely on the FP abbreviation for citations listed in the frontmatter

Commented [HN(14R13)]: Delete entry and rely on the abbreviation FP

Formatted: Not Superscript/ Subscript

Commented [jah15]: AU: or "1, no. 2", where 2 is the issue number, 1 is the volume number

Commented [HN(16R15)]: "1, no. 2", where 2 is the issue number, 1 is the volume number

Wiseman, Rachael. "What am I and What am I doing?" *The Journal of Philosophy*

114, no. 10 (2017): 536–550.