



Self-Reference and Self-Identification

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ABSTRACT

The paper begins with a discussion by Sydney Shoemaker and Michael Woods on the nature of a person and self-knowledge of the mental via a treatment of self-reference and self-identification using first-person 'I' sentences. After setting out their views, we try to remove some difficulties some philosophers have had in getting at the self or pure ego by means of self-knowledge.

KEYWORDS : Self-Reference, Self-Identification, Mind, Body

INTRODUCTION

Sydney Shoemaker has developed an interesting and sound line of argument against some empiricist attempts to analyze or reduce the self, person, or subject of thoughts and experiences to the contents of consciousness and their relations. These theories reject the notion of a self or subject because it is unobservable, and this inconsistent with empiricist principles. But this rejection on the part of empiricists was a mistake. They were rightly objecting to a certain dualist conception of the self as a mental, immaterial, nonphysical, spiritual substance, the potentially disembodied mind of Rene Descartes' Meditations. But they were mistaken in thinking that to deny this, they had to deny that the self is a substance, and the subject of thoughts and experiences.¹

SHOEMAKER'S ARGUMENT

In a painstaking treatment, Shoemaker points out that the empiricist mistake was to suppose that "I perceive an x," where x is some object in the environment, or a mental state I am in, consists of an empirical, contingent relation (perceiving) where both relata are observable. One reason they might have thought this is because it is a contingent situation to be settled empirically, whether a person other than oneself is perceiving a certain object or not. For the statement, "Jones perceives x," it is evident that if I am going to know the truth of this statement on the basis of what I observe, I must observe x, observe Jones, and notice whether or not Jones is in a position to see x. Now when Jones says he perceives x, he is reporting the same fact that that I report when I say, "Jones perceives x." but he does not have to perceive the same things that I notice in order for him to be entitled to make his perceptual claim.

In one's own case, the relation of perceiving is not an empirical, contingent relation, partly because I need to perceive an x in order to be entitled to say "I see x." When I say "Jones sees x" there are two things in my visual field that stand in a certain relation, and as Ludwig Wittgenstein said, anything in my visual field could be other than it is. But in my own case, there is one thing that cannot be otherwise when I am noticing what is in my visual field, namely, the fact that x is in my visual field, and seen from my point of view. This fact is not something I can confirm on the basis of what is in my visual field. To be entitled to say, "I see x," I cannot observe x and observe that I observe x rather than someone else. For if this were necessary, then I would also have to be able to observe x and observe that, in fact, it is not me, but someone else, that observes x, and this is manifestly absurd. It is self-contradictory to suppose that I can perceive x and perceive that, in fact, it is not I that perceives it.

The empiricist mistake was to suppose that "I see x" must be a contingent, observable relation from one's own point of view, in the same way that "Jones sees x" is a contingent truth, both terms of which are observable from my point of view. But the relation of being perceived by me is noncontingent because I cannot observe that this holds by observing both the relata, not because there is no self, subject, or perceiver, but because this relation is not something I could conceivably observe something to lack.² The point here is that the empiricists were taking the wrong path to self and self-knowledge within their own framework.

After one accepts all of this that Shoemaker says, he could easily be led into thinking that it is incompatible with identifying the subject of experience with the human brain and body. From the fact that there is a tree in my visual field, I can assert that "I see a tree," but I cannot observe myself, and at the same time, be observing a tree. On the Cartesian view of a person, as David Hume insisted, I cannot introspect the subject of experiences, that has the perception. If Shoemaker is correct, my perceiving the tree is a noncontingent relation where I do not observe that I perceive a tree, when I make perceptual statements. But on a materialist or physicalist conception of a person, there the subject of experiences or what perceives is the brain and body, it would be possible for me to perceive the tree and perceive my brain (say with an autocerebroscope), and notice whether the brain process was occurring that correlate with perception. But this would be checking my perceptions in just the way I could check up on anyone else's, so it does not seem that Shoemaker's view that the subject of experiences can be the brain or body.

In answer to this difficulty, we must distinguish between what entitles one to say "I see a tree" from what entitles one to say that perceiving the tree consist on satisfying certain conditions which include one's brain and body as satisfying certain conditions that include one's brain and body as standing in certain proximity to a tree. What entitles one to say "I see a tree" is the fact that they perceive a tree.

One need know nothing about what it is that sees the tree, how it is seen, or the conditions that must be satisfied for a successful perception. Given that there is a recognizable tree in my visual field, I do not have to be aware of the self that sees the tree, what does the perceiving, how it occurs, or anything else in order to know that I see a tree.

In the epistemic context surrounding one's own perceptual statements, there is a necessary, noncontingent relation between the subject and object of perception. But in fact what the subject of perception seems to be the brain and body. We can know we have an image and know nothing about what it in fact is. It is noncontingent whether it is I who perceives what is in my visual field, yet it is a contingent fact whether certain conditions for a successful perception are fulfilled, including my brain being in a requisite state, and my eyes and attention being focused, regardless of what I do and do not know. J.J.C. Smart makes a similar point.³

Now one may argue that "I have a headache" is really no different than "I have a long nose."

In both cases there is a subject and an object of the first-person sentence, and something corresponding to the referring uses of subject and object expressions. In the statement "I have a long nose" I can verify this by seeing whether, in fact, I do have a long nose, and I am aware of the subject of the statement when I am aware of the property predicated of it, so I seem to be aware of a subject as an object. In the statement "I have a headache" I am aware of a headache, and this headache is surely a property of myself, so one may say I must also be aware of an subject of a headache as an object since there appears to be no great difference between these two statements on a materialist conception of a person. In order to deal with this, some further

distinctions have to be made that will help explain the differences between these two cases.³

SELF-REFERENCE AND SELF-IDENTIFICATION

In what seems to be an implication of the view perceiving a tree (having an image, feeling homesick, and the like) is a noncontingent relation, Shoemaker elsewhere maintains that there is a sense in which self-reference of the kind in first-person statements where 'I' functions as a singular referring expression, does not involve self-awareness of a self or subject of mental states in any important sense, since some uses of 'I' do not involve an identification.⁴ Borrowing a distinction from Ludwig Wittgenstein's Blue Book, Shoemaker distinguishes between uses of the word 'I' as object and uses of 'I' as subject. Sentences where 'I' is used as subject correspond to a class of predicates P. F. Strawson calls P-predicates, which predicates "imply the possession of consciousness on the part of that to which they are ascribed"⁵ Examples of sentences where 'I' is used as subject include "I feel pain," "I see canary," and "I am moving my arm." Such statements are unique in being totally immune to certain kind of error. When one says "I see a canary," they cannot fail to recognize (cannot misidentify) the person who sees the canary. In the statement "My arm is moving," where 'my' is used as object, I can be mistaken about whether my arm is moving. I might think I'm looking in a mirror, when actually it is someone else whose arm is moving. But "I am moving my arm" is not subject to error by misidentification.

Although the article is not entirely explicit, I think the implication is that there is an important sense in which when 'I' is used as subject, some 'I' statements refer to oneself even though one is not actually identifying oneself, and thus (and this is what is not explicit), one is not, in any important sense, aware of oneself as a subject when 'I' is used as subject when one says or thinks "I see a canary," and need not be aware of himself in any such manner in order to be entitled to use first-person statements that involve the use of P-predicates. But when one says "I am six feet tall," using 'I' as object, one is subject to error through misidentification, thus he is actually identifying himself, and aware of himself or self-conscious. But this is not awareness of oneself through inner sense or introspection. It is awareness of oneself as object in the world with other material things.

This position does not deny that there is an I, or subject of thought and experiences, when one uses 'I' as subject. What is denied is that this 'I' is known as an object on the basis of which one makes first-person psychological statements using 'I' as subject; that there is any important sense in which one is, or must be, acquainted with one's inner self or self-aware. The main reason for this is that the awareness of oneself as a presented object would be a necessary condition for the use of 'I' as subject

only if one had to ground this statement on an identification of a presented object as oneself. But an identification of some object as oneself would have to go along with or accompany the possibility of misidentification.⁶ However, it is impossible to misidentify oneself as the person being referred to in statements like "I see a canary," so one cannot be identifying oneself either. (I assume it is a priori truth that identification is possible if and only if misidentification is possible).

Since one's use of 'I' is most secure when 'I' is used as subject, it is precisely this kind of case that philosophers have thought that one must be most intimately aware of the self or subject as an object, and have been dismayed when they failed to find any introspected object corresponding to the word 'I' or the idea of a subject of experiences referred to in first-person psychological statements. Just the opposite is true. The more secure the use of 'I' is the less need for awareness of anything else such as some object as being oneself.⁴

The fact that 'I' is a token-reflexive term mirrors Shoemaker's point. Since 'I' in being uttered refers to the speaker by virtue of its being uttered, there can be no question as to who 'I' is referring to. But nothing crucial belongs to the use of the word 'I' here, only its function. We could have a language that does not use 'I' or anything synonymous with 'I' (such as 'Ich' in German).

Against Shoemaker's point that there is a sense in which self-reference does not involve self-identification and which one does not have to be self-aware in order to be justified in using first-person psycho-

logical statements using 'I' as subject, Michael Woods has made the following objection.⁷

Woods argues that 'I' is always used to refer to oneself, and it is not always, at the same time, identifying oneself in the sense of discriminating oneself from others. (We might call this the individuating sense of identification). But he argues that there is another sense in which one is self-aware, and is identifying oneself whenever 'I' is used as subject. Woods points out that in order to refer to anything, including oneself, one must have a concept of what one is referring to. To self-refer, one must already have marked oneself off from other things and have some idea of what sort of thing one is. So whenever 'I' is used as subject, the speaker is identifying himself as a thing of a certain kind. (We might call this identifying things as being of a certain kind). But this requirement is more easily satisfied than Woods thinks. If the speaker has a mastery of the language, and knows how to use 'I', he can know what kind of thing 'I' refers to. Knowing how to use 'I' requires a knowledge of what kind of thing personal pronouns refer to, and is sufficient for self-reference.

One is self-aware or self-conscious in an innocuous sense whenever one uses 'I' as subject, since being able to refer to oneself involves having some concept of notion of what one is. The requirements on self-awareness needed to make self-identification successful are not very strong or of much consequence, according to Woods. They do not involve being aware of an instantiation of a subject of psychological states. You might say that whenever one refers to oneself, or is aware of anything, he is also aware of himself as a thing which has a body, since to distinguish something F, we must know how to distinguish F's in general, and this usually involves knowing the spatial limits of the thing.

What is not required for self-reference is that one be aware of himself as a thinking subject or as a disembodied Cartesian subject of psychological predicates. Being aware of oneself as a certain kind of thing (as a person), involves being aware of the kind of body you have and knowing how to use 'I' as a subject of expressions employing P-predicates. Let us say that when one is aware of his thoughts and feelings, he must be aware of himself as a subject, or that which has such psychological states, but he need not be aware of a thinking substance.⁸ Being aware of oneself as that which thinks and feels requires being able to distinguish oneself from others (an ability to identify oneself in an individuating sense), but not actually discriminating oneself as this subject of psychological predicates rather than some other one. Woods hold that in saying "I see a canary," (or in being aware of a headache), one does not distinguish himself from other things in the world.

There is another kind of awareness of oneself as a subject that is required for an awareness of an object other than oneself, which neither Shoemaker nor Woods considers. It is a sense of self or self-awareness that can be gotten at phenomenologically. When I am aware of an object other than myself, I am aware of it as something that is not me, as external, as given outside of me. When I perceive a canary, I perceive it as "other than me." The canary is given as "out," as "not me." But by implication, in order to be aware of the canary at all as "not me," or as "external," I must be aware of it as "external to me." I must be aware of myself in a negative sense, as that which is not the object of my awareness. This is a sense in which I am aware of myself as not being the object that I am aware of, and I must be self-aware in a negative sense in order to be aware of anything other than myself.

This sort of self-awareness does not involve discriminating oneself from others as the person who is perceiving a canary. It does not involve an awareness of oneself as an object of perception at all, but is part of the logical, polar structure of our awareness of any object. Nor is this an awareness of a subject of experiences, the sensuous attributes of a subject of awareness of oneself as a subject of conscious states. For it does not involve any sensuous or conscious contents at all (such as imagery, a thought, or a feeling). It is specified solely in negative terms. It cannot be a way of finding out anything about the nature of oneself, and it is a harmless mode of self-awareness. I shall try to show where other modes of self-awareness are equally innocuous.

THE DISSOLUTION OF SELF-AWARENESS DIFFICULTIES

I think we can begin to see now how some of the traditional problems about "the self" and self-awareness should not have arisen. When oneself is the subject of a psychological predicate, one has all the self-knowledge one needs when one is aware of something, some object, on the basis of which he can truly ascribe a mental state to himself. To say "I see a canary," and be able to know the truth of this statement, one need not be aware of any reference to the 'I,' or of seeing (a perception) in order to be aware of a canary. What I am doing when I say "I see a canary," is making a perceptual claim. The claim is about what I perceive, about my current mental state (one of seeing), and about who it is that sees the canary. But in saying this, one does not identify who it is that sees the canary. The demand that one must be seeing the subject of "I see a canary," when one sees a canary, as an object at the same time, is an unnecessary demand. This is because the analysis of the statement "I see a canary" into subject and object does not have 'I' as an object. One is referring to oneself, but there is no further reason to suppose that referring to something is also being aware that something unless one is doing something else, such as identifying it. This is not what we are doing when 'I' is used as subject, but we can always go on to identify ourselves.

To identify myself would be to make another statement that is not a perceptual claim, such as "I am standing next to the birdcage." The fact that I am not aware of the referent of the 'I' when it is used as the subject of perceptual claims does not have to seem mysterious. I can never catch myself as the object of seeing a canary, feeling homesick, or wanting dinner late, because I am not the object of such statements. This helps to explain why there is a logical asymmetry in first-person psychological statements. If I were identifying myself, or distinguishing myself from others in saying "I remember having breakfast," then there would be cause for puzzlement if I could not be aware of myself as object. For in statements like "My arm moved," or "I have a long nose" I am aware of myself as an object. I can know the truth of "I remember having breakfast," without knowing any facts about my body and without being aware of a memory belief or what it is that does the remembering.

If I were identifying myself in using statements using 'I' as subject, I would have to be aware of some of these things, and the fact that I am not, at the same time, remembering that I am remembering can lead one to think that the self is systematically elusive. The conclusion seems to be that philosophers should refrain from looking inward with a great deal of concentration when they say "I see a canary," when they are thinking about the problem of the self or the subject of consciousness.

I do not think that this will satisfy anyone who wants to believe he is aware of himself whenever he is aware of an object of perception or in a mental state. This can be assayed in the following way. It is a fact that I can be aware that it is I who sees a car whenever I make a further reflective act of self-awareness on who is seeing the car. Shoemaker has not shown that one cannot ever be aware of the self or subject. What is necessary another act of awareness where I say "I am aware that I am the one who perceives a tree." Thomas W. Smythe has treated such knowledge we have of ourselves elsewhere and we do not wish to rehash it here. Suffice to say that one can have an awareness of the self or subject of experiences by having a further, higher order act of perception of the self.⁹

MATERIALISM

The general implications of the above considerations for materialism are the following. Philosophers have pointed out that we perceive something, we do not perceive the subject of perception. This is not because we are only aware of our psychological properties, such as perceptions. Perceptual claims are about some object of perception, such as a canary. In first-person perceptual statements, the person that 'I' makes a reference to is not the object of the perception. This does not mean that the person or subject is something unknowable or nonphysical. For the subject of "I see a canary" could be the object of another perception.

The Shoemaker and Woods discussion shows that the context of a first-person psychological statement is ill-fitted for making claims about the nature of a person due to certain features of the linguistic context. "I perceive a cat" does not cash out as a relation between two objects like "Jones

perceives a cat" does. The fact that I cannot be mistaken about the referent of 'I' or 'my' in "My headache is killing me," or "I see a canary," by misidentifying the referent is a way of pointing out that why this context is ill-fitted for talking about the nature of a person. We have a context here where we are not really saying anything about the 'I' or myself, but about the headache or canary. Words like 'I' and 'my' do not have the function of identifying anything or any attributes in such a context, even though they make a reference. There need be nothing mysterious about this.

We can make a reference to something without saying anything about its nature, or whether it is a physical thing. Woods points out that we must be able to identify whatever we refer to by saying what kind of thing it is, even in cases of self-reference. This condition is satisfied when you can point to the thing in question (oneself), mark off its spatial boundaries or provide an identifying description if needed.

The materialist can add that we should realize that the kind of thing we make a reference to as the subject of "I see a canary," is a physical thing; that the statement makes a reference to two physical objects, a canary and the person who is speaking. But one does not have to realize that he is a physical thing in order to make a successful reference to himself, anymore than they have to realize that their perceptions are physical states in order to make any perceptual claims. To know a thing is of a certain kind, and be able to identify it, it is not necessary to know whether it is a physical thing. We can make identifying references to social institutions without considering them to be physical things, or configurations of physical things, yet this is what some social scientists say they are.

After this is said, we might still feel some sort of dissatisfaction. One may complain that "All that has been shown is that there is no further need for self-consciousness in cases of seeing, thinking, and being aware of a headache." But with some psychological effort, one can be aware or focus their attention on what it is that is having or undergoing psychological states like seeing. This is not just awareness of one's own body or a potential awareness we might obtain from a device that detects brain processes. Rather, one is sometimes aware of oneself as a "thinking substance." Some of the traditional replies to this are famous and I believe well taken.

Berkeley and Kant said that we are not aware of any substance that thinks anymore than we are aware of any material substances as such. We are perceptually aware of properties and qualities of material bodies, and we are aware of our own states and properties, both mental and physical. In addition, both Berkeley and Kant held that we are aware of a thinking activity or power within us of seeing or remembering what we see. From this Berkeley and Kant said that we have a notion or concept of a self or subject that sees and remembers, yet it itself is not seen, and we cannot perceive it.

Much of their discussions on this were muddled by a view of self-awareness an introspective awareness on all fours with our extrospective or perceptual awareness of material things. Kant spoke of such self-awareness as an "inner sense." I think Shoemaker, Gilbert Ryle, and others have successfully criticized the notion if inner perception and will not deal with it here.

What we have called P-predicates which I apply to others, and others apply to me on the basis of observation of my behavior, I do not ascribe to myself on the basis of observation of my own behavior.

P-predicates are those predicates Shoemaker says are immune to error by misidentification, and those are the predicates philosophers have concentrated on in discussing self-knowledge of the subject of experiences. On a materialist view of a human being thoughts and experiences are states of the brain and body, thus the subject of experiences is no different than any other predicates one can ascribe, and the self or subject is a physical substance or thing. If we do not opt for materialism, it would be difficult to say what one is aware of when one is aware of their own psychological states. For both the Cartesian two-substance dualist and the materialist, aware of the subject of psychological states is being aware of that which has sensations, thoughts, feelings, desires, beliefs, and so on. There is another mode of self-awareness when 'I' is used as subject. In addition to being aware that

my own body is the one who is perceiving a tree, I can be aware of my own body as a body in the world similar to other bodies. I can experience my body as a body in the world, as a thing among other things. This corresponds to the use of 'I' as object. But I can experience my body in a different way. When perceiving a tree, I can experience my brain and body as that through which, or means of which, things are revealed to me. With a modicum of reflective effort I can experience my body as that through which I perceive a tree. John P. Sartre has given the example of one seeing one's own hand differently. I can see my hand touching objects like any other object in the world. But I may experience my hand quite differently, not as an object juxtaposed to, or up against another, but as revealing the existence of objects, their hardness and softness, and other qualities of touch.¹⁰ I can experience my hand as an instrument by which I can sense things, and this is a mode of self-awareness.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude that there are modes of self-awareness which involve an awareness of a self, perceiver, or subject of thoughts or experiences in those cases where 'I' is used as the grammatical subject of psychological predicates. But the senses in which we are self-aware (have self-knowledge)

turn out to be innocuous vis-a-vis the demand that self-awareness is more important for finding out the nature of what we are as opposed to other modes of self-knowledge. We can make a reference to ourselves without also identifying ourselves. When using P-predicates in the first-person we cannot be in error by misidentification. When I say "I see a canary" the canary is the object of awareness and not oneself. This removes the worry that many philosophers raised about knowing the self or subject. Self-knowledge of the self or subject is a further move or higher level action. We can be aware of the self or subject through self-reflection. The difficulties philosophers have raised about the self and self-knowledge need not plague us forever.

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