

Spurious egocentricity and the first person

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I here adapt some ideas of Prior's 1967 paper 'On Spurious Egocentricity' in the interest of seeing how much sense can be made of the doctrine that 'I' is not a referring-expression.

This doctrine has been defended, with substantial qualifications, by Wittgenstein (1958, eg 66-7) and, with no qualifications at all, by Anscombe (1975) (a view with seemingly very similar implications has been argued for, in a very different idiom, by David Lewis (1979)). Notoriously, it has met with widespread and sometimes extreme incredulity. However, we are not in a position to reject the view until we have either shown how to solve the real problems its advocates pose for the construal of 'I' as a referring expression (the *referentialist* thesis, as we may call it), thus making the radical alternative unnecessary, or worked out the most plausible version of the account that goes with the thesis in enough detail for us to be able to assess whether the thesis really is vulnerable to the various obvious-seeming objections that might be made against it in its current form. The task of working out in more detail how a non-referentialist account might go is an urgent one for those who suspect, as I do, that the problems Wittgenstein and Anscombe raise for the referentialist account may well turn out to be insoluble. (I also suspect that, as more detail is provided, at least some of the obvious-seeming objections will be seen to be inconclusive.)

The most obvious objection, of course, concerns the logical profile of 'I' (and its oblique cases), which could hardly look more like that of a referring-expression. It occurs in name position, seems to feature in identity-statements, provides the basis for existential generalization, and in fact its behaviour in inferences is pretty much altogether indistinguishable from referring-expressions.

Thus, if I am not referring to myself when I sincerely and credibly assert "I'm warm," for example, we cannot account for the clearly valid spectator's inference drawn from my utterance, that *JD is warm*. Doesn't the inference require that "I" and "JD" alike refer, and to the same object, namely myself? This objection, I think, can be defeated by appeal to a more detailed account of the non-referentialist position. The account would include an extension of Prior's account of 'spurious indexicals'. Prior points out that if you sincerely assert "It's raining," I can validly infer that *you believe* that it's raining, even though neither you nor the attitude of belief have anything to do with the content you asserted. The inference is valid because it is based on more than that content. If the fact of who is speaking is allowed to do expressive work of its own, there is no need to look for anything in the asserted content referring to yourself or the attitude of belief to ground my inference that you believe it's raining (as Wittgenstein says, there is no need for you to point to yourself). My inference is based not only on the content but also on the facts that the utterance was an assertion and it was made by you. My thought is that this strategy might be extended to cover *all* uses of 'I'. The basic idea would be something like this.

Anything I assert using 'I' will be the basis of a valid third-party inference that, if I spoke truly, then whatever I seemingly said was true of *myself* is true of *JD*. But the basis of this inference does not involve an identity between something called 'I' and *JD*, for there can be nothing *called* 'I' since (as we are assuming), 'I' is not a referring expression. Rather, the contribution of 'I' is to indicate that the 'predicate' (not here fundamentally functioning as a predicate – see below) is being expressed *without* a subject but in a special way – precisely the way that licenses your inference that such and such is true of *JD* on the basis of (i) what I said using 'I' and (ii) the facts that it was *JD* who said it and that his saying it was an assertion.

So far this is entirely programmatic. Some more detail can be added to this briefest of sketches by drawing a further parallel with what Prior has to say in the same paper, not about 'A believes that', but about 'it is true that', and 'it is now the case that'. Like 'A believes that', these are both sentence-forming operators on sentences, but both of a rather peculiar kind. The first is to be contrasted with 'it is false that', and the second with 'it was the case that', 'it will be the case that' and so forth. But they differ from these other contrasting operators with which they are grouped, because unlike those, they simply give us back the original sentence. They are, as Prior puts it, the 'vacuous special case'; their effect is to 'multiply by one'.

My thought here is that applied to a certain very primitive language-game, this idea of a 'vacuous special case' might give us a clearer conception of how certain 'I'-statements might be construed non-referentially. The language-game is to be understood in a 'genealogical' spirit, as dramatising hypotheses about broadly logical priorities partly by presenting them as relations of historical precedence.

The initial move-type in the language-game consists of utterances with no syntactic structure, whose point is to draw attention to some attribute of the speaker. Such utterances are intended to make others aware of a physical condition simply by being a conventionally-associated concomitant. A good real-world example would be a leper ringing a bell and shouting 'Unclean!'. Someone who claimed that this is already an 'I'-statement because it is an abbreviation of something like 'I have leprosy' is surely getting things the wrong way around. The person is manifesting one perceptible – aural – property, with the aim of drawing attention to another. The fact that the two properties are instantiated in the same individual, while guaranteed by the situation, cannot plausibly be thought of as 'part of the meaning of the utterance'.

The second move-type involves the speaker drawing others' attention, not to a condition of her own, but of another. There are a number of ways of describing this; possibly the least mystifying would be, in the first instance, in terms of speaking *on behalf of* the other. Obviously the sign must now include, as giving a component of its meaning, some indication of *which* (other) person is being characterised. The important point is that this is the *first* point in the story at which we can recognize anything like reference. It is also the first appearance of syntactic structure, on the assumption that these second-stage utterances will exhibit systematic phonetic

variation in two dimensions, in order to pick out one of any number of subjects and ascribe to them any of a range of conditions.

The third stage is the most complicated. The syntactic structure of the second move-type gets reflected back, so to say, onto the first. There are obvious reasons why this would make sense. By homogenising the form of utterances, our proto-linguistic community facilitates many important valid inferences. It is not that there could not be canons of inference according to which someone might validly move from my structureless utterance conventionally emphasising my condition C to a structured judgement 'He is in C'. But such canons would be cumbersome complex. Opportunities to effect the economies of inferential principle that come with the idea of *formal* validity would be severely limited, in these cases, by the fact that the first utterance-type has no form. The structured nature of the second utterance-type, by contrast, fits it to figure in the formally-valid inference-types made possible by singular terms (or, equivalently here, verb-inflections). The stage is set for judgements of identity, rules for conjunction and disjunction, and the rest. The utterances of the first type would have been largely left out of this system-building, had our speakers not forced them into the mould of the second type, by endowing them with the same form. This requires assigning to them their own distinctive member of the set of phonetic variations (pronouns or verb-inflections, for example) which, in the structured utterances of the second type, indicates the intended subject of predication, ie effects reference.

Notice that, in this narrative, the purpose of introducing what amounts to a first-person pronoun is *not*, as it was with (whatever amounted to) the other pronouns, to pick out a subject of predication. It is, rather, to bring the unstructured utterances into the fold of formally valid reasoning. The assertibility-conditions of the newly-structured 'first-person' utterances are exactly as they were at the beginning of the story. It is not necessary, in order to understand how and why these utterances can now figure in formal patterns of inference, to suppose that their distinctive version of the phonetic feature-type which, in the *other* cases, had a referential function, need have such a function in their case too. In fact, such a supposition would be idle. The tail of inferential convenience is wagging the dog of syntax.

[Nb That the idea is *not* that the content of the 1st-person utterance is given by its inferential role, and so isn't vulnerable to Prior's 'inference ticket' objections.]

If we treat this parable as articulating the semantic status of the first-person pronoun, then, we can see how it conforms to Prior's (parable-like) account of how the operator 'it is true that' might find its way into a formal language, which he gives in support of the deflationist or 'no-truth' theory of truth, associated in his day with Ramsey and Ayer:

One might put the 'no-truth' theory in a technical context thus: In certain symbolic systems a variable, say 'd', is used to stand indifferently for any expression which constructs a statement out of a statement, e.g. 'It is not the case that ___', 'Grass is green

and __', 'It is possible that __', 'Aristotle asserted that __'. Thus 'd (The sky is blue)' can stand indifferently for 'It is not the case that the sky is blue', 'Grass is green and the sky is blue', 'If the sky is blue then grass is green', and so on. In expressing logical generalisations by means of such variables it is useful to include 'The sky is blue' itself, without any adornments, as being among the things that 'd (The sky is blue)' can stand for. But here there is no actual expression that has been put in place of 'd', and we tend to feel that this is awkward. The awkwardness, if we are really worried about it, can be relieved by simply introducing an actual expression which when put for 'd' in 'd (The sky is blue)' will yield a sentence meaning no more and no less than the plain 'The sky is blue'. If we used 'It is the case that __' or 'It is true that __' or 'really' or 'truly' in this way, this would be precisely its commonest use in ordinary English (1967, 328-9).

The current suggestion is that 'I' might be thought of along the lines of the 'dummy' value given to 'd' which gives the same content back, in Prior's explanation here. According to my story about the development of the primitive language game, at the second stage the original unstructured utterance is given a form (by being inflected, say, and/or conjoined with a name or pronoun) to indicate the subject of what now amounts to a predication. But our stage-one utterances, which we may now think of as the 'first-person case' are formally anomalous: they have no structure. This is not only a matter of awkwardness, as in the Prior passage, but also of inferential inconvenience. Therefore the structure that characterises the other second-stage utterances is imposed on this utterance-type too. (Nb this need not involve any phonetic innovation; the original utterance, unchanged, may now simply be treated as the 'first-person' inflection of the 'verb' – such a habit of thought may well be psychologically inevitable.) But this move completely disguises the semantic reality beneath a smoothly homogenous surface: the content of the first-person utterance is still identical with the unstructured utterances of stage one, and so is not really logically 'on a par' with the second-stage utterances. They are logically prior to second-stage utterances, in the sense that they form the basis from which those are derived. They have been rendered fit for easy inferential use by being endowed, at stage three, with form; but this should not mislead us into supposing that the first-person syntactic marker makes *reference* to the speaker, as the subject of predication in the same way as the denotations of other pronouns, names and other genuine referring-expressions, any more than, in Prior's account above, the 'dummy' values of *d* should be thought of as operating on sentences to yield *new* sentences, in the manner of 'It is not the case that __' or 'Aristotle asserted that __'. The 'first-person' utterance is just a notational variant on the unstructured utterances of the first stage.

In the paper I present this account in more detail, and present and respond to a number of pressing objections to it, including the following:

1. How can the 'genealogy' be extended to cover predications of non-sentient entities?

2. Since the first-stage utterances are unstructured and (*a fortiori*) lack a subject-term, they cannot be assertions and their contents cannot be propositional. It seems appropriate to describe them as *expressions* of the properties with which they are associated (think of the leper again). So this looks like a form of 'expressivism' about first-person utterances generally (since the third-stage utterances are supposed to have the same content as those of the first-stage). Notwithstanding the (spurious?) propositional form of the third-stage utterances, how can they figure in inferences if their real content is not truth-apt? In other words, doesn't this account give rise to its own version of the 'Frege-Geach problem'?

3. Perhaps a yet more fundamental difficulty with the claim that stage-one and stage-three utterances have the same content: how can an utterance that lacks truth-conditions be equivalent to one that has them?

4. Insofar as the meaning of first-person utterances is to be understood, according to this story, in terms of their role in inferences, isn't the account vulnerable to the sort of objection made against 'inferential role' theories by Prior in his famous paper 'The Runabout Inference Ticket'?

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