

Reference of 'I': Anscombe

ESSENTIAL INDEXICAL. In the *Meditations* Descartes raises the possibility of doubting the proposition:

I am not a body. (15-1)

Given that 'I am not I' cannot be doubted, this yields:

'I' does not refer to a body. (15-2)

So we say that 'I' refers and that it refers in a special way. Suppose Lenin says:

Vladimir Ulyanov is mad. (15-3)

Lenin spoke of himself, but he may be unaware of that (he forgot his original name). The situation is different with the use of 'I'. There is possibility there to use it and to be unaware who it refers to. In the case of 'I', every user is guaranteed to know what it refers to.

'I' is, then, a referring expression. Can we say that it is governed by this rule:

'I' is an expression every one uses to refer to oneself? (15-4)

Well, we cannot say that, if we mean our rule to be stated in a third-person way. For (15-4) to be non-circular, it has to omit mentioning 'I'. But we already know that there will be situations where the speaker's ignorance is simply down to the ignorance of the indexical proposition, such as:

I am Ulyanov. (15-5)

Now, 'I' can be considered a proper name. The fact that every one, under some circumstances, can use it to refer to oneself, is not an objection.

Question 1. Explain the example of names stamped on people's wrists in page 24.

However, a necessary condition for the use of 'I' would be that the bearer has self-consciousness. Whenever there is an inanimate object apparently referring to oneself in a first person, it is clear we have a case of make-believe (the bottle in *Alice in Wonderland*).

What is self-consciousness? Say simply that it is consciousness of a self. So perhaps we could say that in using 'I' speakers refer to their conscious selves, and that 'I' is a proper name for a self.

'I' AS AN ORDINARY PROPER NAME. Are there general reasons to think that 'I' is a proper name? Well, in the first place it seems to have the same grammatical role as a proper name in the subject-predicate constructions. Then, it is used to identify an object, on different occasion. And its referent is supposed to be a single object.

But if 'I' is a proper name for a self, then a competent use of it would require the ability to repeatedly identify the self. Suppose this can be done. Even so, we want to say that this ability is *not* part of the competent use of 'I'. Hence 'I' is not an ordinary proper name.

Another reason why 'I' is not a proper name can be extracted from the discussion of Descartes' argument. For suppose it is. Then when Descartes asserts (15-1), 'I' refers to Descartes. Now Descartes is a human. Humans have bodies. Thus (15-1) is rather trivially false. But this misses the point of Descartes' argument.

'I' AS A DEMONSTRATIVE. Yet even if 'I' is not an ordinary proper name, it can still be a singular term, i.e. an expression which from the logical point of view is used to identify a single object. Which one could it be?

One possibility to consider is that it is a pronoun. But this option, Anscombe argues, leads us nowhere. Pronouns do not have to refer at any particular object ('If a person believes in God, then he is pious').

So 'I' may be a demonstrative like 'this' or 'that'. Anscombe notes that such a view would still have to incorporate some commitment to a self. For suppose we think that 'I' is a demonstrative like 'this'. Then a statement:

I am hot (15-6)

would be paraphrased as:

This[pointing at my chest] is hot. (15-7)

Then you could meaningfully ask, 'This what? the chest?', and the response would be:

This self is hot. (15-8)

GUARANTEED REFERENCE. Alas, 'I' cannot be a demonstrative. With demonstratives, there is a possibility of reference failure. I can point at a box of chocolates you have brought and say: 28

This is a nice surprise! (15-9)

Unbeknownst to me the box is empty. What I meant to speak about was chocolates. Since they are not there, the reference of 'this' is empty. Yet, we can say that the use of 'this' was nevertheless appropriate, given that there was something in the vicinity on which 'this' latched on. As I understand Anscombe, we say that a correct use of 'this' is compatible with the term having no reference. The fact that reference is missing is no evidence that the use of the relevant demonstrative was merely incompetent.

In the case of 'I' there is no possibility of a similar reference failure. Just thinking of a proposition 'I am *F*' already guarantees the existence of a referent, the endowment of 'I' with a referent on the given occasion.

DEGREES OF GUARANTEED REFERENCE. What does this reference guarantee amount to? Not merely the fact that 'I' is syntactically a proper name. And not merely the fact that it always has *some* object as a referent. Rather, it amounts to the claim that 'I' refers exactly to 'I'-user. But even this is not sufficient. For the 'I'-user should intend to refer to something through his use of 'I', and that whatever the user takes the referent be, the referent actually is: if the user takes the referent to be *X*, the referent is actually *X*. This seems to work in the case of 'I': I could not possibly take some other object to be myself other than *myself*.

REFERENCE TO 'THIS BODY'. So, what the reference of 'I' could be if the term has guaranteed reference. Consider the possibility that it is 'this body'. And suppose that I am put in a state of sensory deprivation. I lose the capacity to interact with my body. Then my body is not present to my senses. And thus, when I think: 31

I am not in touch with my body any more, (15-10)

I am not thinking a contradictory thought. Generally, I have not in this condition lost the ability to use the term 'I'. The term still has guaranteed reference which we insisted on earlier. Hence, it seems that the only option left for the reference of 'I' is Cartesian ego.

REDUCTIO COMPLETED. The argument, as Anscombe explains, has from the beginning been a *reductio*: 31

- (i) If 'I' is a referring expression, it is a singular term (of some kind).
- (ii) If 'I' is a singular term, it must have guaranteed reference.
- (iii) And if it has guaranteed reference, its reference is the Cartesian ego.
- (iv) But having the Cartesian ego as a reference of 'I' is wrong.
- (v) Therefore, 'I' does not have reference at all.

But why to accept (iv)? Chiefly because we cannot identify the ego. How can I be sure that there is a *single* ego thinking Cartesian thought? How can I be sure there is anything at all that unites these thoughts? Perhaps all there is is a collection of perceptions and ideas (as Hume argued). 32

'I' IS NOT A REFERRING EXPRESSION. To accept the *reductio* we have to accept that 'I' does not refer. How is this possible? The statement:

I am SB (15-11)

is not identity proposition. The identity proposition is:

This thing here is SB. (15-12)

We can derive (15-11) from (15-12), but only assuming a further proposition:

I am this thing here. (15-13)

So there are genuine I-thoughts (since there are genuine I-propositions), but these thoughts are all legitimised in virtue of their use, not of the reference they are putatively endowed with (there is in truth no such reference). They are reports of the states of the body, 'this body here', which I can then identify as SB. 34