Perplexing ‘I’

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The first person pronoun ‘I,’ especially in the context of the proposition ‘I think,’ has played a prominent role in several famous arguments in modern philosophy. Here are some examples:

Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode (Discourse on Method)* (1637): “Cogito, ergo sum,” “I think, therefore I am.”

Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft (Critique of Pure Reason)* (1787): “The I think must be able to accompany all my representations. For otherwise … they would either be impossible, or at least be nothing to me.”

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921): “The philosophical I is not part of the world. It is the limit of the world.”

There are also dissenting voices.

Georg Christian Lichtenberg, *Sudelbücher (Wastebooks)*, (late 1780s): “We should say ‘it thinks’ or ‘there is thinking going on’ rather than ‘I think’.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse (Beyond Good and Evil)* (1886): “A thought comes when it wills, not when I will.”

To which we might add the voice of the poet, Arthur Rimbaud, *Lettre du Voyant, (Letter of the clairvoyant)* (18781): “I is another.”

And finally a voice that seems to give its due to both sides of the dissent:

Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis* (1933): “Wo es war, da muß Ich werden.” “Where it was, there must I come about.”
So what is so special about ‘I’? Or even without the word ‘I,’ what is so special about the use of the first person form of the verb?

1- The fundamental reference rule.

Linguists and semanticists will tell you: the fundamental rule that defines the meaning of ‘I’ is: ‘I’ refers, in any instance of its use, to whoever is saying or thinking ‘I’ or more specifically, to whoever is uttering the sentence or thinking the proposition in which ‘I’ is the subject of the verb, as in: ‘I am walking,’ ‘I see the lake,’ ‘I think this is going to be difficult…’

This reference rule formulates the first striking fact about ‘I’: in using ‘I,’ the person thinking or saying, for instance, ‘I am walking,’ makes herself, as the person thinking the thought or uttering the sentence, part of the content of her thought – what her thought is about. In using ‘I,’ I am both within and without the content of my thought, both inside and outside the situation I am describing. Think of those cartoons in which the character’s thought comes out of her head in a bubble, e.g. ‘I’m scared!’ The content of the bubble is a statement about someone, herself. It is the statement that that person is scared. So our cartoon character is referred to in the bubble. But she is also outside the bubble, doing making reference to herself. Or think of those maps with an arrow pointing to where I am. My current location is referred to, indicated on the map. But I am outside the map, in front of the map, looking at the point indicating my location.

This is the most basic source the puzzles concerning ‘I.’ To use ‘I’ is to locate oneself, as the person thinking, within the content of one’s thought.
Another, related feature is equally important: knowing how to use ‘I’ is understanding that any other person using ‘I’ thereby refers to herself just as I, in using ‘I,’ refer to myself. This too is indicated by the fundamental reference rule. It is a pretty complex rule to apply. That’s why it’s not obvious for children to learn the use of ‘I.’ Rather than exploring the question of learning, however, here I will continue exploring the question: how do we use ‘I,’ assuming we have learnt to use it?

2- Uses of ‘I’

We use ‘I’ in asserting something about ourselves—the individual currently thinking the thought or uttering the sentence in which ‘I’ is used. What I will examine now are two kinds of information on the basis of which we may assert something of ourselves. One is a particular kind of information we have about the state and position of our body. The other is a particular kind of information we have about our own mental activity. There are many other uses than the ones I will examine. There are many other kinds of information about the state of our body than the kind I will be considering, and there are other kinds of information about what’s going on in our minds than the kind I will be considering. I will in fact mention some of those along the way. But the kinds I am going to be focusing on are especially central to any use of ‘I.’

2-1) I am standing in front a lectern, giving a talk. I say: ‘I am standing.’ I say it not on the basis of watching myself stand. The latter could be the case if I was seeing myself in a mirror, or even looking down at my feet and legs and torso and thinking, on the basis of seeing my legs and feet: ‘I am standing.’ In the circumstance I am considering, I am looking at the audience, paying attention to them not to myself, and
nevertheless I am aware that I am standing. This awareness is based on proprioception and sense of balance. A remarkable feature of this kind of information is that on this basis, it cannot be the case that I am correct in believing someone to be standing, but mistaken in believing it of me, the person currently thinking and saying ‘I am standing.’ This is because in this way, namely on the basis of proprioception, if I know anything I know it of me. And similarly in this way, nobody else can know anything about me, but only about herself. Of course, I can know of other people that they are standing by looking at them, and they can know it of me by looking at me. However, in this other way (looking at someone) we can each be mistaken in identifying who is standing.

Suppose I say, thinking I recognize my friend Tobias: ‘Tobias is standing over there’! I may be mistaken: his twin brother is standing over there. Misidentification is also possible in statements about myself. Suppose I say: ‘I am standing’ (looking at a person I take to be myself in a mirror, or in a photograph). It’s possible that I am correct in stating that someone is standing. But the person standing isn’t myself but my friend, or my sister. In contrast, when I think ‘I am standing’ on the basis of proprioception, I may be dreaming. But if I am correct in stating, on the basis of proprioception, that someone is standing, then I am also correct in stating that the person standing is myself (the thinker and speaker referred to by ‘I’ in the proposition currently thought or the sentence currently uttered, ‘I am standing’). That we have this kind of awareness of our body, where knowing something to be true just is knowing it to be true of me—this kind of awareness is essential to our experiencing a body as our body—where merely seeing, or touching, or hearing, would not do the job. This does not mean that we do not use ‘I’ based on these other kinds of information as well (seeing or touching or
But the fact that we could be mistaken, that we could take someone else for ourselves, when we say something about ourselves in these other ways, does show that they participate in a more indirect way to our thinking about ourselves as ourselves—the referent of ‘I.’

2-2) A second kind of information has a privileged role in our using ‘I’: information about one’s own mental activity.

Suppose I am going through the steps of a difficult proof. I complete the proof and triumphantly look at the colleague standing next to me, expecting her to congratulate me. Instead she says: ‘Sorry, this proof is invalid!’ I look again, I check the steps of the proof, and I say: ‘I think the proof is valid!’ I am not looking into my own mind to figure out what I think. Rather, I am directing my attention at my proof. I am checking the steps of my proof. This is my ground for reinforcing my initial statement: ‘I think the proof is valid!’

This second case is a striking use of ‘I.’ It has two features in common with the previous case. Just as I didn’t need to look closely at my own body to know I am standing, I do not need to look into my own mind to know I think the proof is valid. And just as it could not be the case that, on the basis of proprioception, I could be correct in believing someone to stand but mistaken in believing that someone to be me (the thinker currently thinking the thought ‘I stand here’), similarly, on the basis of checking the steps of the proof, it cannot be the case that I am correct in believing someone to think the proof is valid but mistaken in believing that someone to be me (the thinker currently thinking the thought and the speaker currently uttering the sentence, ‘I think this proof is valid’). In fact, in this second case the impossibility of
misidentification is even more radical than in the first case. For here, not only is it true that on the basis of checking the steps of the proof, knowing someone to think the proof is valid just is knowing it of me, but there is no other way for me to know I think the proof is valid than checking the steps (where as there are other ways to know I am standing than proprioception). So there is a more fundamental connection between ‘thinking’ (the proof is valid) and ascribing the thought to myself than there is between standing, and ascribing the bodily position to myself.

The same situation as that expressed by the thought ‘I think the proof is valid’ obtains in more ordinary cases, such as statements based on perceptual experience. Suppose I look out the window, vaguely recognize a shape in the distance, and say: ‘This is a tree!’ My sister replies: ‘This, a tree? No way!’ I dig my heels and say: ‘Yes, I think this is a tree!’ And perhaps I give my reasons for reasserting that this is a tree: the shape of the object we vaguely see in the distance, the angle, the light, and so on. In giving these reasons I am making explicit an implicit computation of information that has been going on, allowing me to recognize the shape I saw as that of a tree. Those reasons may include my own position with respect to the tree, the quality of my eyesight, and so on. So here I am asserting ‘think this is a tree’ of myself, the thinker currently thinking ‘I think this is a tree’ on the basis of my awareness of my own bodily position with respect to the tree as well as on the basis of my reasoning through the information available to me.

Even more than the use of ‘I’ in ascribing some bodily state to oneself on the basis of proprioception, the use of ‘I’ in stating ‘I think’ on the basis of going through the steps of a proof or an argument or a justification of any kind is a central case of use
of ‘I,’ one on which all other uses depend. This is because the kind of information on which it rests is at the background of any use of ‘I.’

Consider a case in which the two kinds of information—proprioceptive awareness of one’s body, awareness of one’s rational mental activity, break apart.

3- Christina

In The Man who mistook his wife for a hat, and other clinical tales, Oliver Sacks tells the story of a young woman he calls Christina and describes as the “the Disembodied Lady.” Following an antibiotic treatment in preparation for a relatively minor surgery, Christina started gradually losing the sense of her own body. According to Sacks’s description and diagnosis of her case, the antibiotic treatment had triggered an autoimmune reaction that resulted in an acute polyneuritis: not the Guillain Barré syndrome, which affects motricity, but one that affected the sensory roots of spinal and cranial nerves responsible for proprioception. She had lost all proprioceptive awareness of her body, from the tip of her toes to her face.

When the condition first set in, she literally slumped. She could not stand without looking at her feet and legs, she could not hold anything in her hands without looking very carefully at her hands. Even her facial muscles lost tone and expression. Then she undertook, with the help of her medical rehabilitation team, to compensate for the loss of proprioception by using vision to monitor the movements of her body. She also used auditory feedback to compensate for the loss of proprioceptive control of her vocal tone. As a result, says Sacks, she developed elegant, clearly artificial postures and vocal tonalities, which gradually became second nature. But when she stopped paying
attention, when she stopped monitoring her own posture like you would keep a rag doll straight, she just slumped.

Sacks reports the following conversation with Christina:

“What I must do is use vision, use my eyes, in every situation where I used – what do you call it? – proprioception before. I’ve already noticed that I can ‘lose’ my arms. I think they’re one place, and I find they’re another. This ‘proprioception’ is like the eyes of the body, the way the body sees itself. And if it’s gone, like it’s gone with me, it’s like the body’s blind. My body can’t see itself if it’s lost its eyes, right? So I have to watch it – be its eyes. Right?”

“Right,” I said, “right. You could be a physiologist.”

“I’ll have to be a physiologist,” she rejoined, “because my physiology has gone wrong, and may never naturally go right.” (Oliver Sacks, The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat, Simon and Schuster ©1970, p.47-48)

A question worth asking is: on the basis of what kind of information does she say anything about herself—the individual currently thinking the thoughts and uttering the sentences cited above—? How does she recognize herself as the bearer of the predicates she asserts of ‘I’ in the sentences reported by Sacks?

She sees (“I must use my vision”). As the thinker and speaker, she is the bearer of a visual standpoint.

She also locates herself with respect to that body she is trying to control.

That experience of control is the context in which she calls this body “my body.” What she calls “my arms” are the arms whose movement she controls as long as she can keep her eyes on them. But she has no proprioceptive sense of those arms.
So they are hers, and that body is hers and experienced as hers, only insofar as it is the body she directly controls, in contrast to all other bodies around it, which are only indirectly controlled, through the mediation of this body.

Most importantly, whatever other experience it rests on, Christina’s use of ‘I’ in the statements reported above clearly depends on the kind of unity of mental activity I described as the fundamental kind of information on which our use of ‘I’ depends. She says: “I’ve noticed,” “I think,” “I’ll have to.” Even if she has no feeling of her own individual body, she is individuated for herself by those activities and their connection: noticing, thinking, setting herself rules for actions.

On Sacks’s account, Christina gradually retrieved some proprioceptive experience of her own body, in particular through sensitivity in her skin. Nevertheless, in her own tragic description of her condition, she experiences herself as “pithed like a frog – disembodied” (ibid., p.52). Sacks comments:

She had lost, with her sense of proprioception, the fundamental organic mooring of identity – at least of that corporeal identity, or “body-ego” which Freud sees as the basis of self. “The ego is first and foremost a body ego.” (ibid., p.52)

So here’s the paradox in Sacks’s description of Christina. She has lost the “fundamental organic mooring of identity . . . the body-ego.” And yet she uses ‘I,’ effectively and powerfully, albeit with a keen sense of loss, which she experiences as the loss of her very self—any meaningful referent for ‘I.’ This raises the question of the connection between the two fundamental kinds of consciousness of oneself cited above: consciousness of a body one experiences, proprioceptively, as one’s own; and consciousness of the unity of a mental activity one takes to be one’s own.
4- Freud’s view of the mind

Sacks’s reference to Freud in this context is especially significant. The quotation is from Freud’s 1923 essay, *The Ego and the Id*. The passage cited occurs just after Freud has expounded his notion of “*Ich*,” translated by Freud’s English translator, James Strachey, as “*ego*.” Freud characterizes what he calls “*Ich*” as an “organization of mental processes.”

Here’s Freud:

> We have formed the idea that in each individual there is a coherent organization of mental processes; and we call this his ego. (Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, in the Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, London: Hogarth, p.17)

This “coherent organization of mental processes” obeys what Freud calls the “reality principle.” He means by this that the concatenation of representations belonging to the ego is gradually structured, in the development of the individual, in such a way as to yield information about the world that are sufficiently reliable to serve life-preserving action. As such, the ego is developed over against the mass of representations Freud calls “the id” “*das Es*.” In contrast to the Ego, the id is structured according to the “pleasure principle”: very roughly, unpleasurable representations are avoided and pleasurable representations are promoted, even at the cost of privileging fantasy over reality.
Now according to Freud, representations of our own body are at the core of the organization of mental events he calls “ego.” This is because all the information we receive from the outside world passes through some state of our body. Freud writes:

The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but it is itself the projection of a surface. (Ibid., p.26)

In Freud’s characterization of the ego, we have a striking account of the two fundamental kinds of self-consciousness described above: consciousness of one’s own body; consciousness of the unity of one’s mental activity such that there are correct and incorrect ways of connecting one’s thoughts, some conducive to truth, others conducive to error or even systematic illusion. Acquiring such an “ego” and thus a capacity to think and speak in the first person, taking oneself to be accountable for the truth and falsity of what one says and things, is not a matter of introspection or paying attention to one’s thoughts. It is a matter of paying attention to the world and to one’s intentional goings about in the world.

On Freud’s account, both aspects of the ego (the body ego, the organization of mental processes within which the body ego has its privileged role) are to be gained and regained over against what constitutes the mass of our mental life, the id. The id is the unruly mass of drives that constitutes the energetic core of our mental life. Drives are biological needs that find expression in our mental life in the form of raw emotions: hunger, sexual desire, aggression, fear, and the corresponding feelings of pleasure at having the relevant longings satisfied and displeasure at having them ignored. This is a different sense in which the ego is a bodily ego. What it means is that the energy that drives the ego to organize itself under the reality principle comes from the id, that
aspect of our mental life that is just the expression of our drives to self-preservation and reproduction as living beings, and obeys not the reality principle, but the pleasure-unpleasure principle: seek pleasurable states, flee from unpleasurable ones. And this principle is constantly at work to disrupt the “reality principle” according to which the ego is organized.

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No wonder modern philosophy has been so preoccupied with ‘I.’ Locating oneself, the individual currently engaged in thinking, within the content of one’s thoughts, is not just a feature of the use of ‘I’ as a particular word in particular languages. It is a difficult mental achievement that is a decisive acquisition in the development of the child. It is also a decisive acquisition in the intellectual development of human kind, the core of the Copernican revolution that opened the modern period, that the eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant took to be the model for his own philosophical enterprise, and which is also, in Freud’s words, the first of three narcissistic wounds humankind had to endure. I am the bearer of only one among many actual or possible standpoints on the world, each to be assessed in connection with the kind of information and the kind of mental activity on which it rests.

Investigating the role and meaning of the first person in language and in thought is a multifaceted enterprise, which calls on the history of philosophy, philosophy of language, philosophy of psychology, epistemology, and metaphysics. It breaches traditional divides between sub-fields of philosophy and between the so-called
“continental” and “analytic” schools in western philosophy. It also calls for a dialogue with non-western philosophical traditions.