

"The Peculiar Grammar of the Word 'I'"

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In this essay I discuss the place the word 'I' has in our thought and language, a word that seems to have caused much confusion in the philosophical discussion. It has often been thought to point to some non-bodily entity, a soul or a self, or function as a name for the person who is using it about himself. Wittgenstein's suggestion however, is that 'I' in some situations does not serve as a recognition of a certain person among other. I do not for instance have to know which person is in pain to know that I am, and Wittgenstein proposes that we, instead of seeing 'I' in the proposition 'I am in pain' as a way of picking out or identifying a particular person, should see it as something similar to moaning.

The above remark that "[w]hen I say 'I am in pain', I do not point to a person who is in pain" (PI 404) can be seen in relation to Wittgenstein's discussion of "the peculiar grammar of the word 'I' and the misunderstandings this grammar is liable to give rise to" (BB p. 66). He suggests that part of the reason that we get into philosophical confusions about the word 'I' is that we are misled by similarities in the way we use this and other words. When we, for example, are talking about pain and are saying 'He is in pain' and 'I am in pain', it is easy to make the mistake to believe that we in both instances are talking about the same thing. Both propositions, 'He is in pain' and 'I am in pain', seem to describe one thing, that a person is in pain, and the only difference between them seems to be that we are pointing to different persons in the different cases. In the first case we are pointing to some other person than ourselves and in the second case to ourselves. Wittgenstein however wants to point out that what we are doing in the two cases is not the same thing. We are not pointing to a certain person when we say 'I am in pain' as we are when we are saying 'He is in pain' or 'Jones is in pain'. This is connected with Wittgenstein's remark that "[i]n 'I have pain', 'I' is not a demonstrative pronoun (BB p.68) and the quote that forms the starting point for this essay, that "[w]hen I say 'I am in pain', I do not point to a person who is in pain, since in a certain sense I have no idea who is." (PI 404).

Now, it might be wrong to say that the only reason why we so easily seem to fall into certain philosophical muddles, as that of the 'I', is the different ways we are using our language, even if Wittgenstein sometimes seems to imply this. If that was the case we would find philosophical confusions whenever we could spot a similarity in the different uses of language, and there seem to be many situations that disprove this point. We might well have a similarity but not be tempted to make any philosophical conclusions about it. When we are approaching a philosophical problem however, it does seem quite right to say that part of our problems can stem from the way we use our language and from thinking about our language in an over simplistic way.

To return to the original quote, we can ask in what sense I do not have an idea of who is in pain when I say that I am? In trying to answer this question we can begin in the other end and ask in what sense I can have an idea that somebody is in pain. Wittgenstein continues the previous remark in the following way:

What does it mean to know who is in pain? It means, for example, to know which man in this room is in pain: for instance that it is the one who is sitting over there, or the one who is standing in that corner or the tall one over there with the fair hair and so on (PI 404).

To know that someone is in pain is to be able to pick out or point to a certain person as a person having pain. As Wittgenstein goes on to say there are many different ways to identify this person, we can point to certain bodily features, we can talk about the person as the one "sitting over there" and so on. When I say, 'I am in pain', I am not however picking out or pointing to a certain person who is in pain. I am not identifying a certain person in the room as the person who is in pain. When I say, 'I am in pain' I cannot be mistaken about which person is in pain, as I may be when I say, 'He is in pain'. I might have believed that it was the person sitting over there who was in pain but learn that it really was the person standing in the corner. I cannot however believe that I was in pain and then realise that I was mistaken and that in fact it was somebody else who was in pain. I can believe, doubt or be mistaken about that another person is in pain but I cannot believe, doubt or be mistaken about that I am in pain. In relation to this we could also ask in what sense I can know that I am in pain. I know that somebody else is in pain because they, or someone else, tell me that they are, or because I observe it in their behaviour. I see that they are in pain because I see and hear them crying out, groaning, limping and so on, but I do not have to observe my own behaviour, see that my face contorts in a mirror for example, or tell myself that I am in pain, to know that I am in pain. I do not have to know that I have pains, I have them.

It then seems as if there is a difference in how I come to know about my own and others' pain. When I say somebody else is in pain I am pointing to a bodily being who is in pain, and more specifically to certain bodily behaviour if I want to justify why I think this person is in pain. When I say "I am in pain" it does not seem as if I am pointing to a specific bodily being. I do not have to look for certain bodily features to know that I am in pain, or to justify my reasons for thinking that I am in pain to somebody else. Instead I seem to be able to say that I am in pain with an immediacy that does not apply to the things I can say about other people's pain. This has led some philosophers, with Descartes in the lead, to think that the real 'I', or the real person, is something else than the bodily being. The real 'I' is thought to be a non-bodily entity, a soul or a self, that has its seat in my body and has direct knowledge of my inner states so that I can say with, as it turns out to be, at least some kind of certainty that I am in pain without having to examine the way my body behaves. When I say, 'I am in pain', I am then, according to this view, identifying and referring to an entity within myself as the thing that is in pain.

This idea creates problems for our possibility to say something about other people's pain. Where we, to begin with, seemed to be able to talk about other people's pain and justify this talk by referring to their behaviour or what they have been telling us, our knowledge about their pain now seems to stand on much shakier ground. We can only know that another person is in pain indirectly and by analogy. I will not go further into this discussion here, but only remark that this does not seem to be a correct description of our thought that the person who took a nasty fall and now lies on the ground clutching his foot is in pain.

Saying that what I do when I say that I am in pain is identifying an entity within me that experience the pain also causes problems for how we are to understand the word 'I'. First, we might ask whether it really is possible to think of the 'I' as something separate from my body. There is an important sense in which I am my body and do not know what it would be to think of myself as separated from it. It is not clear exactly what this entity would be either, and how I could identify it and talk about it, since it is not anything I can ever observe or experience. A more important objection for this essay has to do with the idea that this entity is something that we identify as the I. This objection faces the same problems as the idea that we identify a bodily being when we talk about ourselves as being in pain. If I

have to identify a non-bodily entity within myself who is in pain, to say that I am in pain, there seems to be a possibility for me to make a mistake about who is in pain. How do I know that this entity is the entity that feels pain and that this entity is the one I previously referred to as I? But as Wittgenstein states, it does not make sense to doubt who is in pain when I say that I am. "To ask "are you sure that it's you who have pains?" would be nonsensical." (BB p.67) It is part of the grammar of propositions like 'I am in pain', 'I am tired', 'I am hungry', that I cannot be mistaken or in doubt about who is in pain, tired or hungry if I utter these sentences. If we think that 'I' is to be identified with a non-bodily entity, however closely it might be said to be related to us, there seems to be room for having this doubt and making this mistake though.

This does not mean that all propositions where the word 'I' is used have this character. Wittgenstein, for instance, separates two different uses of the word. The examples I have mentioned above, 'I am in pain, hungry, tired' make part of one of the categories. These do not rest on my picking out a certain person who is in pain, hungry or tired, neither a bodily or a non-bodily being, and there is no room for me to make an error of who it is that is in pain, hungry or tired. The other use of the word 'I' involves the recognition of a particular person and in these cases "[t]he possibility of error has been provided for" (BB p. 67). This is, for example, the cases where we say "My arm is broken" or "I have grown six inches" (BB p.66). If I say this, I am saying things about my body, things that I might need to check to know and that I might be mistaken about. It might be, that I have only grown five inches or that my arm is not really broken, the doctor may have looked at the wrong x-rays and thought that it was my arm that was broken when it really was somebody else's. These cases do not differ that much from the cases where we pick out and say things about other people's bodies. The activity of picking out a birthmark on my body is not any different from picking it out on another body (although I can have some problems to access some parts of my own body). It is important to notice what character the mistakes we can make in these cases are like though. Even if I can be mistaken about what body these x-rays are pictures of, or on what body there is a birthmark on the right arm, I am not mistaken about which body is my body.

Even if I can be mistaken about my arm being broken, I cannot be mistaken about my arm aching. It is not part of the language game of having pains to be able to make this mistake. This is what Wittgenstein is falling back on when he says that 'I' in 'I have pain' is not a demonstrative pronoun. The demonstrative pronouns are used to pick out a person among other people, a he or she and so on, but when we say 'I am in pain' we do not pick out a certain person from others. The temptation to say that we do however, seems to be great. One way of thinking about this, closely related to the idea that 'I' points to a bodily being, is that 'I' points to the person C.K., a person with a certain name, a history, certain personal characteristics and so on. The thought here is that the use of 'I' is not any different from the use of any other personal name, it only so happens that I have chosen to replace the name 'C.K.' with 'I' when I talk about C.K. Instead of saying 'I am in pain' I could say 'C.K. is in pain', children in fact may use this way of speaking before they learn to master the word 'I', and this would not be any different from saying 'LW is in pain'. Considering I's place as a pronoun we might ask why I would be used as a replacement of a personal name since we do not have to know the name of someone to be able to use the other pronouns, such as he or she, when we talk about other. Since one of the purposes with this essay is to show that 'I' has a particular place in our vocabulary we might let this objection pass for now. In connection to I's relation to the personal name we might however consider this remark that Wittgenstein makes,

The word 'I' does not mean the same as "L.W." even if I am L.W., nor does it mean the same as the expression "the person who is now speaking". But that does not mean: that "L.W." and "I" mean different things. All it means is that these words are different instruments in our language. (BB, p. 67)

Saying 'I am in pain' and 'C.K. is in pain' is not the same thing, 'I' and my personal name are used for different things in our language. Even if we had a language where we would use our personal names instead of 'I' we would still have a difference in meaning between the propositions 'C.K. is in pain' and 'LW is in pain' when C.K. says that 'C.K. is in pain'. As Wittgenstein says:

The difference between the propositions "I have pain" and "he has pain" is not that of "L.W. has pain" and "Smith has pain". Rather it corresponds to the difference between moaning and saying that somebody moans. (BB, p.68)

and at another place:

...And even if I do 'want to distinguish between myself and other people – do I want to distinguish between the person L.W. and the person N.N.? (PI 406)

When I say 'I am in pain' I am not trying to distinguish a certain person, C.K., from other persons to inform them that this person who has a name, a history and so on, also has pain. I do not have to know what person is in pain to say that I am. I might suffer from amnesia and not know what my name is, not remember my family or my previous life, but still be able to say 'I am in pain'. I might doubt that my name is C.K., that these people are my parents or that I study philosophy, but I cannot doubt that I am in pain. This is one way of understanding what Wittgenstein means when he says that I, when I say 'I am in pain' in a certain sense have no idea who is. I do not have to know who is in pain to know that I am. An analogy to the way we use the word 'I' here, is the way we use the word 'here' in 'I am here'. I do not have to know where I am, to know that I am here. I can, for example, doubt that I am in Lampeter but I cannot doubt that I am here. Even if I am completely lost I am still able to say 'I am here'. However, this does not mean that 'here' is some non-spatial place that I am always walking around in. It rather shows the way the words 'here' and 'I' work in our language.

Wittgenstein talks about 'I have pain' as a replacement for moaning. We understand that a person is in pain from the words 'I have pain' in the same way as we would understand that he is in pain from hearing him moan or cry out. This is also true for the use of the words 'I am here' in some situations. If I answer my friend's call 'Where are you?' with 'I am here' when we are lost in the woods on a pitch dark night, my friend will not know anymore about my geographical position but can hopefully get an idea of where I am from the sound of my voice. The words 'I am here' do then serve in the same way as the cry 'Help' or 'Carrot' would. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein also describes learning how to use the words 'I have pain' as a way of learning new pain behaviour (PI 244). The child learns how to say 'I am in pain' instead of crying out, and by doing this, it learns a new expression for its pain and also what pain is. This idea of the words 'I have pain' as an expression of our pain could be one way of understanding some of the uses 'I' has in our language. We are not picking out, or trying to distinguish a certain person that is having the pain when we say 'I am in pain'; "in saying this I don't name any person. Just as I don't name anyone when I groan with pain" (PI, 404). 'I' does not refer to anything more than a groan of pain does. There is nothing that separates the 'I' from the pain, the hunger, or the tiredness when I say that I am in pain, tired or hungry. The words are an expression of this pain, hunger or tiredness, it is part of what it is to be in pain, hungry or tired to say that I am.

The object of this essay has been to show the particular place 'I' has in certain uses in our language. 'I' in 'I have pain' does not have the character of picking out a certain person, a bodily as well as a non-bodily being, among other persons. Rather it is a proposition that can be understood as a moaning, as an expression of my pain, a part of my pain or simply my pain. Now, some philosophers following Wittgenstein, primarily Elisabeth Anscombe, has taken this, that 'I' in some uses does not refer to a particular person, further and claimed that 'I' never refers to anything. I am not going to go into this discussion at a greater length here. However, it does seem as if Wittgenstein left room for the idea that, even if 'I' does not refer to anything in the cases 'I am in pain', 'I am tired' and so on, in some cases it does refer to something. These cases are the ones that I have discussed earlier, the cases where "[t]he possibility of an error has been provided for", such as "My arm is broken" or "I have grown six inches". Norman Malcolm argues that the fact that we can make a mistake in these cases does not mean that 'I' refers to a particular object and takes this to be bound up with the conclusion that Anscombe comes to in her article "The First Person", that "'I am EA' is after all not an identity proposal ("The First Person", p. 60). This does seem like a correct conclusion. Saying 'C.K. is the daughter of Bengt and Helen Kronqvist' is not the same as saying 'I am the daughter of Bengt and Helen Kronqvist'. In the first case I am making a statement about the identity of C. K., but in the latter I am not making a statement about the identity of 'I', even if the statement is true. This is related to the remarks that I can still say 'I am in pain' even if I have no idea who I am, in the same way as I can say 'I am here' even if I have no idea where I am. There are however situations where I use 'I' to refer to this particular being C.K., in the same way as I, right now, use 'here' to refer to my room in Lampeter. Saying that we are wrong to say that 'I' refers to something in these situations, because 'I' never refers to anything, seems a bit odd. It strikes me as if some of the philosophers writing on this subject have been so intent on refuting the idea that 'I' in some cases is used to refer to something, that they have not noticed that in some cases it really does. 'I' has different meanings in different uses, and this seems to be a point they should support rather than deny.

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1 A big problem with the idea of the 'I' as something distinct from the bodily being can be seen in the problems at least I have in working out an appropriate grammar for these things. If the real I is an non-bodily entity that I need to pick out and identify there seems for example to be a question of who it is that is doing the picking out and identifying?