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**'I am Elizabeth Anscombe'
is Not an Identity Proposition**

One would normally suppose that when I utter the word 'I' (in felicitous, everyday circumstances, as when I say to my wife, „I tried to call him, but I only got his answering-machine“ — or when I write the very sentence that contains this parenthesis), I refer to something — that „something“ being, of course, myself. Many philosophers, however, would deny this. One obvious reason for denying that when I utter the word 'I' I refer to myself is this: there are no such things as persons (which is what I should be if I existed), and I therefore can't have referred to one of them. Some philosophers endorse the position that there are no such things as persons as a consequence of some very general metaphysical view, one that entails that all those things that are normally thought of as individual things are in some sense unreal: Parmenides, Spinoza, the Absolute Idealists, the adherents of certain Eastern religions, Bertrand Russell (at some points in his career), Peter Unger (at some points in his career). Others would deny that there are persons for some reason peculiar to persons. Hume, or so I interpret him, held that if there were such a thing as myself, I should be able to find it in introspection, and I find no suitable referent for the word 'I' when I enter most intimately into what I call myself. What I find in introspection are impressions and ideas that would be qualities of the referent of 'I' if it had one; but since (I find) there is nothing „in there“ to be the referent of the word, I must conclude that there are only the impressions and ideas, free-floating qualities that inhere in no underlying substance.

I will not in this essay discuss the position of those philosophers who deny that there are such things as persons. I want to consider

instead a well-known argument for the conclusion that, although there are persons, I do not refer to one of them when I utter 'I' — an argument for the conclusion that, although there is such a thing as myself, I do not refer to it when I say 'I'. The argument I propose to consider is to be found in Elizabeth Anscombe's essay „The First Person.“¹ Professor Anscombe's position is that it is not the function of the word 'I' to refer; the word is thus unlike 'the present king of France', which is in the denoting business but is a failure at it; rather, the word, despite the fact that it can be the subject of a verb or (usually in its objective-case guise, 'me') the object of a verb, is not in the denoting business at all. Thus, for Hume (and for Parmenides et al.), the word 'I' refers to nothing in the way 'the present king of France' refers to nothing; for Anscombe, the word 'I' refers to nothing in a way more like the way in which 'if' and 'however' refer to nothing.

Some of Anscombe's conclusions in „The First Person“ seem to me to be correct. I think she is successful in showing that 'I' is not a proper name that each person uses for himself. (I will follow her lead in using masculine third-person pronouns to make generalizations about persons; if she doesn't object to this practice, who am I to revise the language of her arguments in the interests of political correctness?) She argues persuasively for the conclusion that if a language did not have first-person singular pronouns — or something equivalent, like the Latin inflections '-o' and '-m' —, one could not introduce the first-person singular into that language by introducing a proper name that each person used for himself and for no one else. She points to difficulties in classifying 'I' grammatically, and perhaps these difficulties are real. She points out, correctly I think, that if 'I' refers, it does so without any need for help from a classifier — unlike, for example, the demonstrative pronouns.² But none of these excellent points and true conclusions lends any support to the thesis that when I say 'I' I do not refer to myself.

¹ G.E.M. ANSCOMBE, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Mind: Collected Philosophical Papers, Volume II* (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 1981), pp. 21-36. The essay originally appeared in Samuel Guttenplan (ed.), *Mind and Language: Wolfson College Lectures 1974* (Oxford, 1975).

² But it is not unique in having this property: 'here' and 'now' would seem also to have it — at least if there are such things as places and times.

She has an argument that is supposed to show that if 'I' is a referring expression, Descartes was right about the nature of its referent. Since I think Descartes was wrong about the nature of the referent of 'I', I'd regard this conditional conclusion as a very strong reason for accepting the denial of the antecedent, although, of course, a Cartesian wouldn't. In any case, I am unable to follow her argument for the conditional.

She also has an argument that is supposed to show that, as she puts it, 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' is not an identity proposition. And one can certainly see why she would want to establish this conclusion; for if the sentence 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe', spoken by her, did express an identity proposition it would certainly express a true one, and therefore 'I', when she used it in this sentence, would refer to Elizabeth Anscombe; and if 'I' referred to her when she used it in this sentence, it would seem likely that it would refer to her when she used it in any sentence. If 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' is not an "identity proposition," it does not, of course, follow that 'I' does not refer. Still, one might well ask, isn't the most obvious argument for the conclusion that 'I' refers something like the following?

When I say, „I am Peter van Inwagen,“ I speak the truth; but when I say this, I utter an identity sentence; an identity sentence consists of two terms that flank the identity-sign; an identity sentence expresses a truth just in the case that its two terms denote the same thing; therefore, when I say, „I am Peter van Inwagen,“ 'I' and 'Peter van Inwagen' refer to the same thing; therefore when I say this, I use 'I' to refer to Peter van Inwagen; and as it is with this sentence, so presumably it is with all sentences I utter that contain the word 'I'.

If this argument were not sound, this would, it seems to me cast considerable doubt on (though it would not refute) the thesis that when I use the word 'I' I refer to myself — for this argument seems to be a sort of compendium or summa of all the reasons I have for thinking that when I use 'I' I refer to myself. And if Anscombe's contention that 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' is not an „identity proposition“ were true, this argument would not be sound. But this contention is not true. This is easily seen if we consider the sentence 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' in the company of other sentences, of sentences that are uncontroversially identity sentences. Suppose, for example, that we imagine that Anscombe engages in the following simple piece of reasoning:

I am Elizabeth Anscombe
Elizabeth Anscombe is the author of Intention
Therefore, I am the author of Intention.

This reasoning would certainly be logically valid. And what could be the ground of its validity if not the principle of the transitivity of identity? And how could the principle of the transitivity of identity be the ground of the validity of this argument if 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' were not an identity-sentence? The example is, as I said, a simple one. Before anyone attempts to defend Anscombe's position by some sort of analysis of this argument that has the consequence that it is valid despite the fact that 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' is not an identity-sentence, I would ask that person to remember that there are more complicated pieces of valid reasoning involving identity and the first person than this one, and that his analysis is going to have to account for the complicated ones as well as the simple ones. Here is one of the complicated ones:

There are exactly two people in this room, of whom I am one
No two people who are alone together in any room are wearing ties of different colors
Someone in this room is wearing a green tie
Therefore, if I am wearing a tie, it is green.³

If anyone is able to account for the validity of this reasoning without assuming that 'I' is sometimes one of the terms that flanks the identity-sign — well, I should like to see it done. (I should like to see someone do it without assigning to the first premise of the argument the following logical structure: Someone x is in this room and someone y is in this room and x is not identical with y and anyone in this room is identical either with x or with y and I am identical with x or I am identical with y .) And if 'I' can occur beside the identity-sign, it must denote something, or, at least, like 'the present king of France', represent itself as denoting something. This follows from the standard, Fregean account of the identity-sign, and this account has no workable rivals.

³To be formally valid, the argument requires an additional premise: if x and y are of different colors, then at most one of them is green.