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“I am *NN*”:

A Reconstruction of Anscombe’s “The First Person”

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a way of understanding G.E.M. Anscombe’s essay “The First Person”, at the heart of which are the following two ideas: first, that the point of her essay is to show that it is not possible for anyone to understand what they express with “I” as an *Art des Gegebenseins*—a way of thinking of an object that constitutes identifying knowledge of which object is being thought of; and second, that the argument through which her essay seeks to show this is itself first personal in character.

Understanding Anscombe’s essay in this light has the merit of showing much of what it says to be correct. But it sets us the task of saying what it is that we understand ourselves to express with “I” if not an *Art des Gegebenseins*, and in particular what it is that we understand ourselves to express with sentences with “I” as subject that might seem to express identity-judgments, such as “I am *NN*”, and “I am this body”.

1. G.E.M. Anscombe’s essay “The First Person” is famous for its remark that “‘I’ is neither a name, nor another kind of expression whose logical role is to make a reference, *at all*” (1975, p. 32). This remark is widely believed to state an “extraordinary” thesis that no one can seriously entertain.¹ But directly after making this remark Anscombe writes: “Of course we must accept the rule ‘If *X* asserts something with ‘I’ as subject, his assertion will be true if and only if what he asserts is true of *X*’” (1975, p. 32). Whatever she is rejecting, in rejecting the idea that “I” is an expression “whose logical role is to make a reference”, she is not rejecting this rule. What, then, is she rejecting? The aim of this paper is to answer this question in a way that enables smooth sense to be made of her essay, and in so doing allows the truth of her “extraordinary” remark to be appreciated. The paper will not give a line-by-line reading of Anscombe’s essay, but will rather provide an alternative way of

communicating the ideas that Anscombe was trying to communicate, with a view to bringing out their content, and their truth.² The paper will fall into four parts. The first part (in §§2-8) will answer the question just raised, and will suggest that understanding the argument of Anscombe's essay requires understanding its argument as itself first personal in character. The second part (in §§9-17) will reconstruct its argument in the light of this suggestion about its character. The third part (in §§18-28) will consider a response to the argument, which rests on failing to see that it has this character. And the fourth part (in §§29-35) will present, and raise a difficulty, for the understanding of the first person that we are left with at the end of her essay.

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2. Fregean orthodoxy has it that, in using a subject-predicate sentence whose subject is a singular referring expression, the user knows what it is for a use of the sentence to be true. *Inter alia*, the user knows which object is referred to by the expression in subject-position, and as such knows which object a use of the sentence turns on for its truth. The knowledge that the user enjoys, in knowing which object this is, is identifying knowledge. It is not merely general knowledge to the effect that the expression in subject-position refers to something that belongs to a certain general kind, or satisfies a certain general description. It is an *Art des Gegebenseins*—a way of being given an object—which amounts to a way of distinguishing the object from everything else. And it is in this light that Anscombe's "extraordinary" remark is to be understood. To reject the idea that "I" is an expression whose logical role is to make a reference is to reject the idea that a sentence with "I" as subject is a sentence whose uses contain this identifying knowledge. The Fregean orthodoxy has it that, in using a sentence of subject-predicate form whose subject is a singular referring expression, and so in enjoying identifying knowledge of which object the use of the sentence turns on for its truth, the user thinks a singular thought—the singular thought that the use of the sentence expresses, on account of its containing this identifying knowledge. In rejecting the idea that

“I” is such an expression, Anscombe is rejecting the idea that a use of a sentence with “I” as subject expresses such a thought. And as such, she is rejecting the idea that, in a use of such a sentence, “I” expresses identifying knowledge of which object is being thought of: an *Art des Gegebenseins*—a way of being given an object, or way of thinking of an object—which amounts to a way of distinguishing the object being thought of from everything else.

(Identifying knowledge of which object is being thought of, in a singular thought, just is identifying knowledge of which object the use of the sentence which expresses the thought turns on for its truth: it is the same knowledge, but described in terms of the thought expressed, rather than in terms of what expresses it.)

3. If this is what Anscombe is rejecting, then it is clear how she can reject the idea that “I” is a referring expression, without thereby rejecting the familiar rule. To reject this idea is to hold that no identifying knowledge is internal to any use of a sentence with “I” as subject, and as such, that no use of such a sentence expresses a singular thought. But this does not mean that it is not possible to assign conditions of truth to uses of such sentences by means of the rule. Consider someone who uses such a sentence, and call him “NN”. It is possible to come out with an instance of the rule, in the shape of the following sentence: “NN’s assertion of a sentence with ‘I’ as subject is true if and only if the predicates that he uses assertively are true of NN.” And identifying knowledge of which object NN’s assertion turns on for its truth is internal to the use of this last sentence. But no such knowledge, and as such no *Art des Gegebenseins*, is internal to NN’s assertion itself. The fact that NN’s assertion conforms to the rule does not entail that NN has the identifying knowledge that might be thought to be internal to his use of “I”. Let it be granted that NN understands the rule, and so knows that any assertion of a sentence with “I” as subject turns for its truth on how things stand with the one who makes the assertion. As that is a piece of general knowledge, it does not contain a way of being given a particular object, and so it cannot equip NN with any identifying knowledge. *A fortiori*, it cannot equip NN with the identifying knowledge that his use of “I” might be thought to express. And Anscombe’s point is that there is no such thing as the

identifying knowledge expressed by his, or anyone's use of "I". That is what she means when she says that "I" is not an expression whose logical role is to make a reference, *at all*.

4. It would be silly to fuss over the word "reference", or the phrase "referring expression". Suppose that this phrase is understood disjunctively: to mean *either* a term that expresses an *Art des Gegebenseins*, and as such constitutes identifying knowledge of which object is being thought of, *or* a term that does not express a way of thinking of an object, but may nonetheless figure in subject-position in assertions to which conditions of truth may be assigned by means of the rule. Anscombe is not rejecting the idea that "I" is a referring expression so understood. But given what she is rejecting, to argue against her it is not enough to show that "I" conforms to the second disjunct of this disjunction. That is a point she brings out in her essay. She imagines a "logician"—or, as she elsewhere calls him, an "insensitive logician" (1976, p. 55)³—for whom it is a sufficient explanation of the meaning of "I" that its use conforms to the rule; "the 'way of being given' is of no concern to him" (1975, p. 29). And she stresses that merely acknowledging the rule does not vindicate her fundamental target: the idea that the use of "I" is associated with a distinct "way of being given", which constitutes identifying knowledge. To argue against her, it is this idea that needs to be vindicated. Gareth Evans sees this. His work has the great merit of having Anscombe's target squarely in view. To explain "I" as a referring expression, in the sense that is of concern both to him, and to Anscombe, would—as he sees—be to specify "the way in which we know, when we think of ourselves [and as such, when we use 'I'], which object is in question" (Evans, 1981, p. 318): it would be to specify the *Art des Gegebenseins* associated with the use of "I", in such a way as to reveal it to constitute identifying knowledge. And this is what Evans seeks to do. But it is what much of the literature that purports to argue against Anscombe does not so much as try to do—because it does not have Anscombe's target clearly in focus.⁴

5. And this is not all. Understanding Anscombe's essay requires being clear, not only about the idea that she is seeking to undermine, but also about the character of the argument through which she seeks to undermine it. Much of the literature that purports to argue against Anscombe not only does not have the first clearly in focus; it does not so much as consider the second.⁵ But Anscombe begins her essay by introducing the idea of an argument with "an essentially first person character": for someone to grasp such an argument "he must administer it to himself in the first person" (1975, p. 21). And it is a central contention of this paper that understanding Anscombe's argument requires seeing it to share this character.

6. As an example of an argument with this character, Anscombe considers (what she calls) the "corollary argument" to Descartes' *cogito*. For someone to endorse this argument is for him to assert: "I am not a body"—and in so doing to take himself at once to think of an object in the act of using "I", and to judge of this object that it is not a body. Indeed, as Anscombe notes, if "Descartes" is taken as the name of a body ("that Frenchman, born of such-and-such a stock, and christened René" (1975, p. 21)) he must equally assert: "I am not Descartes"; and the same goes for any name with this character that takes the place of "*b*" in the schema "I am not *b*". In general, someone who endorses this argument must take himself, in asserting something of the form "I am *b*", to express an identity-judgment: a judgment composed of the way of thinking he expresses with "I", which affords identifying knowledge of which object is being thereby thought of, and the way of thinking he expresses with "*b*", which affords identifying knowledge of which object is being thereby thought of, whose truth entails that the object thought of in the first way is identical to the object thought of in the second. And he must hold that, if "*b*" is the name of a body, then this judgment is false.

7. "Well, he is right on the first of these points—but wrong on the second." That is likely to be the majority view amongst contemporary philosophers who self-advertise as anti-Cartesian. But for Anscombe this view is not anti-Cartesian enough. For the truth is that he is wrong on the first point (and so neither right nor wrong on the second): he is wrong to take

himself to be expressing an identity-judgment in asserting something of the form “I am *b*”—because he is wrong to take himself to be thinking of an object in using “I”. That is what Anscombe seeks to establish. And because her target partakes of an “essentially first-person character”—as the use of the phrase “take himself” in its specification shows—her own argument against this target must equally possess this character. That it does is our guiding principle here. As with Descartes’ argument, for someone to grasp her argument “he must administer it to himself in the first person”.

8. To bring this out, we shall consider someone who does this. He could be anyone. We shall call him “*NN*”. We shall consider *NN* asking the questions that Anscombe asks, and answering them in a manner that matches her own—all “in the first person”. Our approach will not be that of a theorist: thinking of him, and asking questions about him. It will be more like that of the reader of a novel: going on a journey with him, as he asks these questions of himself. We shall not be asking how exactly it is that he thinks of an object, in using “I” and its cognates; we shall rather be considering him asking: “How exactly is it that I think of an object, in using ‘I’ and its cognates?” As it might be put: we shall not be seeking to articulate an understanding that happens to concern *NN*, but shall rather be considering *NN* seeking to articulate self-understanding. We shall often be in the third person. But we must bear in mind that the pronoun “he” which figures in the specifications of the thoughts that we shall ascribe to *NN* is that special pronoun to which Hector-Neri Castañeda awarded a star (Castañeda, 1966). This means that when we say, for example, that *NN* assumes that he expresses an *Art des Gegebenseins*, or that *NN* desires to specify what he expresses with “I”, what we are saying is that he assumes (as he would put it) “I express an *Art des Gegebenseins*”, or that he desires (as he would put it) “to specify what I express with ‘I’”. Rather than littering the text with this device—which is likely to generate obscurity (as well as ugliness)—this point will be taken as given from now on.

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9. *NN* is a Fregean. He assumes that in using “I”, or a cognate expression (such as “me” or “myself”), he expresses an *Art des Gegebenseins*. But he is curious. He wants to understand this—he wants some sort of specification of what he expresses, in using “I”, which makes it clear to him that this is a way of thinking of an object. And he has a certain conception of what it would be for him to do this. He takes it for granted that thinking of an object is a matter of knowing which object he thinks of: he has a conception of a totality of objects, and he takes it for granted that in thinking of one of these he exercises some way of distinguishing the object he thinks of from all others. His desire, then, is to specify what he expresses with “I” in such a way as to make it clear to him that it affords identifying knowledge of which object he thinks of, when he thinks something that he expresses with this, or a cognate expression. And this is surely not a *recherché* desire. A common reaction for at least some people to have, on being confronted with Anscombe’s remark that the logical role of “I” is not to make a reference, is to say (perhaps a little exasperatedly): “Of course ‘I’ refers! On my lips, it refers to *me*.” And as the one who says this says “*me*”, he will accompany his utterance with a pointing gesture—the base of his finger facing away from him, and its tip facing towards him. It is not unnatural to think that this gesture is intended to constitute an act of picking out, from the totality of objects, the object that he is thinking of in using “I”, and in so doing to manifest identifying knowledge of which object this is.

10. *NN* thinks that he can understand what he expresses with a proper name as constituting knowledge of this sort. So, he begins by attempting to treat what he expresses with “I” as a species of the generic way of thinking that he expresses with proper names. That requires understanding what he expresses as involving some conception of the sort of thing that he thinks of in using “I”. And this seems clear to him: he thinks of a body—“a spatial and temporal, perishable and divisible substance” (Rödl, 2007, p. 127), something that is such as to be given to ordinary sensory consciousness (visual consciousness, for instance). And not only that: he thinks of a specific kind of body, one of those about which he has come “to learn

that it is a human being” (Anscombe, 1975, p. 34). (In what follows, the variable expression “someone” will be used to signify some body about which it is possible “to learn that it is a human being”.⁶)

11. But this cannot be right—as *NN* can see. As *NN* sees it, a proper name is attached to an object through the object’s being given to sensory consciousness. And in general, how objects are given to sensory consciousness is expressible by uses of demonstratives: by a use of “This human being”, for example. To attach a name to an object in this manner is to refer to the object through a demonstrative, and in so doing to say of a name that it refers to the demonstrated object—by coming out with something on the lines of: “‘*NN*’ refers to this human being”, for example. But merely coming out with something on these lines is not sufficient for attaching the name. Actually attaching a name presupposes the capacity, not merely to make a demonstrative reference to an object at one time, but to identify the same object again at later times. And, as *NN* sees, this capacity is fallible, in that it is vulnerable to a certain kind of error. It is possible to take someone given at a certain time to be *NN*, but be wrong—because he is not *NN*. (This might happen because the one given looks like *NN*, even though he is not.) As it might be put: the capacity to use a name is vulnerable to errors of identification. And, as *NN* sees, the same cannot be true of the capacity to use “I”. *NN* is prepared to concede that there might be a class of exercises of this capacity that are vulnerable to errors of this kind, on account of their uniting “I” with a predicate from a certain class, and as such having a certain kind of epistemic basis. The predicates in this class fix it that exercises of the capacity involving these predicates are based on identity-judgments expressible by the use of sentences with “I” as subject. For example, someone falsely asserts: “I look *F*”, on the basis of seeing someone who looks *F* and making the false identity-judgment (as she would put it) “I am that one”; and because her assertion is based on a false identity-judgment, it is possible to say that she falsely takes the one that she thinks of in making this assertion to be (as she would put it) “myself”. But this case contains the idea of an exercise of the capacity to use “I” that is not based on an identity-judgment—in the shape

of the exercise of this capacity that figures in the expression of the identity-judgment in this case. The capacity to use “I” may be said to divide into two capacities: first, the capacity to use “I” together with something other than a predicate from this class, and as such not on the basis of an identity-judgment; and second, the capacity to use “I” together with a predicate from this class, and as such on the basis of an identity-judgment expressible by the use of a sentence with “I” as subject. And the first capacity is not vulnerable to errors of identification. On the basis of these reflections, *NN* concludes that “I” cannot refer in the manner of a proper name—because if it did refer in this manner, then the capacity to use “I” would not divide into these two capacities: the capacity to use “I” together with anything would be vulnerable to errors of this kind, just as the capacity to use “*NN*” together with anything is vulnerable to such errors.

12. *NN*'s attempt to self-understand what he expresses with “I” as an *Art des Gegebenseins* seems to have run into the ground. He is briefly tempted to drop the idea that led to the present difficulty—the idea of a capacity to identify the same again over time. But he soon sees that what he expresses with “I” cannot simply be a way of thinking of someone who is present to sensory consciousness at some time, whoever it happens to be—for then it could be a matter of thinking of someone other than (as he would put it) “myself”. (That would seem to be the generic way of thinking associated with the demonstrative expression “That human being”, itself a species of the generic way of thinking associated with demonstratives—a genus that may be characterized simply as a way of thinking of something through its presence to sensory consciousness.)⁷

13. Perhaps, however, there is life in his attempt yet. One further difficulty that might seem to stymie it is that it seems that he could still use “I” even if he were in the kind of situation envisaged by the Cartesian “dreaming” skeptic—undergoing a series of hallucinations across all of the ordinary sensory modalities, and as such not having anything present to his ordinary sensory consciousness at all: even in such a case it seems that he is still thinking something

that he could express by using “I”—by saying “I seem to see something” (for example). But he is not sure that this is a real difficulty. For why could not something of the right sort be present to consciousness even then? That would mean two things: first, the relevant mode of presence cannot be the one that makes bodies present—call it “outer” presence; and second, the relevant conception of what he thinks of cannot be that of a human being, or of any kind of body at all. The presence—call it “inner” presence—would have to be possible even when there is no “outer” presence, but merely an instance of thinking something. But then “what conception can be suggested”, of what he thinks of in this case, “other than that of *thinking*” (Anscombe, 1975, p. 29)—for what could be present in this case, other than an instance of thinking? It seems that what is thought of cannot be a body, but something whose nature consists solely in thinking—a Cartesian Ego. This is not what *NN* initially hoped for, but it might at least seem to avoid the vulnerability to error through misidentification that afflicted his attempt when it was understood in terms of “outer” rather than “inner” presence.

14. But how can it avoid this? As far as *NN* can see, the only way to single out an instance of thinking through its “presence to consciousness” (Anscombe, 1975, p. 30) is by employing the generic way of thinking associated with demonstratives, alighting on one of the objects of “inner” presence, and stipulating: “I’ stands for *this thinking*”. *NN*’s hope is that he will thereby set up a way of thinking associated with “I’”. But as Anscombe sees, this position faces “the intolerable difficulty of requiring an identification of the same referent in different ‘I’-thoughts” (1975, p. 31). The difficulty is apt to come into focus as a problem about how to recognize the same instance of thinking across time. The instance of thinking that was present at an earlier time could leave behind a trace in the memory; but even if the instance of thinking that is present at a later time is sensibly the same as the trace that is equally present at this time, that is no guarantee of real sameness: despite there being no sensible quality which the former does not share with the latter, the instance of thinking that is present at the later time might still be different from the instance of thinking that the trace presents. So, the possibility of identification-error opens up: the thinking present at the later time could be

taken to be (as *NN* would put it) “myself” even though it is not. But the problem is that *NN* has no idea how to go about identifying the same instance of thinking at a later time. And this suggests that the difficulty lies at a deeper level. The very idea of misidentifying an instance of thinking rests on the idea of an instance of thinking that is capable of persisting over time but happens to be replaced by a different persisting instance of thinking that in some way matches the first at the level of sensible appearance. But it is not clear that the idea of thinking has the substance to provide for the idea of instances that persist over time at all.⁸ What is there in the idea of thinking to provide for the idea that an instance of thinking at one time, and an instance of thinking at another time are the same instance of thinking? It is tempting to say that they are same just in case they are “in” the same thinker. But this answer is precluded, because in the present Cartesian context the very idea of a thinker is itself being explained in terms of the idea of an instance of thinking. It might be tempting to say that they are the same just in case they have the same content. But this answer is equally precluded, insofar as it must be possible for a single thinker to think different things at different times, and so, in the present Cartesian context, insofar as it must be possible for a single instance of thinking to admit of different contents at different times. Short of these answers, it is hard to see how to understand the idea of an instance of thinking as the idea of something that is capable of being the same at different times; it is hard to see how to understand it as the idea of a substance (in the sense of something that is capable of such temporally extended sameness).

15. According to Anscombe, it was this difficulty that “led Russell at one point to speak of ‘short-term selves’” (1975, p. 31). And because *NN* sees the difficulty here, it briefly seems to him that the only way to avoid it is to insist that “‘I’ [be] freshly defined with each use” (Anscombe, 1975, p. 30): by stipulating on each occasion of use that “I” stands for whatever instance of thinking is present at the time. But soon even this seems doubtful. For it is not clear to *NN* that he has any idea how to go about getting hold of an instance of thinking through its presence to sensory consciousness. How can it be that when he speaks of “this

thinking” he gets hold of just one instance of thinking? Why could he not be getting hold of many, “thinking in unison”? As Anscombe memorably puts the point: when the possessed man in the Gospel says “Legion, for we are many”, perhaps that should be taken “solemnly, not as a grammatical joke” (1975, p. 31). These questions show the confusion *NN* is in. And the source of his confusion is the same as before: insofar as the idea of thinking lacks the substance to provide for the idea of instances that persist over time, it is not clear that it has the substance to provide for the idea of instances of thinking as objects of singular demonstrative reference at all.

16. And with that, *NN* concludes that his attempt has failed. He cannot make sense of what “I” expresses as a way of thinking of something that is present to consciousness, be it a human being, or a “Cartesian Ego”. He starts to suspect that the culprit here is the very idea of what is present to consciousness, and that the governing idea must be the idea, not of what is present, but of what presentations are made *to*: not of what is in front of, but of what is behind the lens. But what is that, and how does he think of it? He is now tempted to come out with the following. “It is simply: me; myself; I—the subject. It cannot be something that I think of in the manner described and rejected above (in §§9-15). In this sense, it cannot be *in* the world at all. ‘It [is] not to be found. It [is] rather as it were an area of darkness from which light [shines] on everything else’ (Anscombe, 1975, p. 32). I am not *an object*, in the sense of something presented, something that is in the world. I am *the subject*.”⁹ In coming out with this, he is trying to preserve the minimal idea of “I” as expressing an *Art des Gegebenseins*, even in the teeth of his inability to make sense of this. But it is not long before he starts to have doubts. He has failed to specify how he thinks of (what he wants to call) “the subject”. And he is not sure whether he is speaking of anything at all, in speaking of “the subject to which presentations are made”—any more than he was in speaking of “this thinking”.

17. Barred from appealing to an account of the sort canvassed in §§9-15 above, he really has no idea how he thinks of an object in using “I”. He cannot understand what he expresses with “I” as an *Art des Gegebenseins*. So, he has a choice: either hold on to the orthodoxy and start to come out with the only dubiously intelligible stuff that he came out with in §16; or abandon the orthodoxy that he has tried but failed to make sense of, and seek to articulate an alternative. And, ultimately, he decides to take the latter course.

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18. Before we continue with the story, it is worth considering an attempt to defuse the present difficulties: by adopting the perspective of a theorist (mentioned in §8). *We* can think of *NN*, and ask how it is that *he* thinks of an object in what he expresses with “I”. And perhaps we can answer this question from this perspective. Perhaps we can explain how *NN* gets hold of what is (as he is tempted to put it) “behind the lens”, by going behind his back.

19. Any attempt to give an account from this vantage point might begin with Anscombe’s rule: “If *X* asserts something with ‘I’ as subject, his assertion will be true if and only if what he asserts is true of *X*”. That might seem to point to a similar rule that holds at the level of thought: if someone thinks in the manner expressible by a first person pronoun, then he thinks in a manner that fixes it that he thinks of himself. Once we have this second rule, it is easy to bring *NN* under it. And that is because, in the case of what we express with “*NN*”, we have exactly what *NN* does not have in the case of what he expresses with “I”, but does have in the case of what he expresses with “*NN*”: a specification of what is expressed, which makes it clear that this is a way of thinking of an object that constitutes identifying knowledge of which object is being thought of—in the shape of a specification of the sort considered in §§10-11, which does not work for what is expressed by “I”, but is fine for the case of what is expressed by a proper name. Through bringing what we express with “*NN*” together with this rule, we can bring the object that we thereby think of under the rule. We can say this: “*NN*

thinks of himself'. (More fully: "If *NN* thinks in the manner that he would express with "I", then he expresses a way of thinking that fixes it that he thinks of himself'.) And once we have brought *NN* under the rule, in this manner, it might seem that we have an account which can enable *NN* to understand not only that what he expresses with "I" is a way of thinking of an object, but also which object this is.

20. But this is not right. No account given from a theorist's perspective can hope to equip *NN* with this understanding, because it cannot hope to express the way of thinking of an object that it says that *NN* expresses with "I". An account given from this perspective can say that *NN* expresses a way of thinking of himself. That seems to get hold of the right object—but it does not express the putative way of thinking of this object that it mentions.¹⁰ As Anscombe puts it: "through the peculiarity of our construction, we have succeeded in specifying an object (by means of the subject of our sentence) without specifying [how *NN*'s] mind is supposed to latch on to it" (1975, p. 23). The way of thinking that we express with the subject of our sentence "*NN* expresses a way of thinking of himself"—that is, with "*NN*"—is not the way of thinking at issue; and because the object of our sentence is merely the ordinary reflexive ("himself"), to the extent that we express any way of thinking with the object of our sentence it can only be the very one we express with the subject. Of course, we can say that what *NN* expresses, in using "I", is not the way of thinking that anyone can express with "*NN*", but the way of thinking that *NN* would express with "I". But to say that is not to *express* the (putative) way of thinking that *NN* wants to understand. If there is such a thing as the way of thinking of an object that *NN* expresses with "I", then it cannot be expressed from this perspective: from here it must remain dark, in a black box, as the quotation marks around "I" serve to convey. And for this reason, no account given from this perspective can help *NN* in his quest. *NN*'s topic, introduced in §9, is (as he would put it) "what I express with 'I'". His topic is not simply something that he can speak *of*; it is—fundamentally—something that he can, and does express. His aim is to give a further specification of what he expresses, and in so doing to make it clear that this is a way of

thinking of an object, which constitutes identifying knowledge of which object is being thought of. The reason why an account given from a theorist's perspective cannot be of any use to *NN* is that it is incapable of expressing this way of thinking. As it might be put: because *NN* seeks self-understanding, he seeks an account of his topic *from its own standpoint*—an account that expresses the topic, and then proceeds to specify it further. And no account given from a theorist's perspective can express the topic. So, no account given from there can be an account of the topic from its own standpoint—and as such, it cannot be of any use when it comes to equipping *NN* with the understanding that he is looking for.

21. There are places in philosophy where this last point seems to surface. Gareth Evans chastises accounts that fail to specify “the way in which we know, when we think of ourselves, which object is in question” (1981, p. 318). It seems to matter that Evans describes what is missing in the first person. It suggests that the account of the way of knowing that he goes on to give is meant to enable someone—such as *NN*—to acquire self-understanding, by enabling him to understand what he expresses with “I” as a way of thinking of an object that constitutes knowledge of which object is being thought of. But it does not do this. And as we shall see, it is not clear that it is meant to do this at all.

22. Evans begins with the idea of an assertion of a sentence with subject-predicate structure whose subject is “I”—what he calls “a self-ascription”. He goes on to distinguish between mental and bodily self-ascription. On the bodily side, Evans mentions two ways of knowing: through “proprioception”, and through “perception”. Each seems to be a mode of presence to consciousness, and as such incapable of revealing what “I” expresses to be an *Art des Gegebenseins*, for the reasons given in §§9-15.¹¹ On the mental side, he mentions one: through some form of reasoning; through judging *p* as a result of theoretical reasoning the judging subject knows (as he would put it) “I believe *p*”, for example.¹² But that cannot explain “I”, on the subject's lips, as not purely formal—it cannot explain it as a device that expresses a way of thinking of an object. Evans sees this: he notes that without a suitable

background “we secure no genuine ‘I think’ (‘think p ’) to accompany his thought (p): the ‘I think’ which accompanies all his thoughts is purely formal” (1982, p. 226). This background must include an account of how uses of “I” get hold of an object, and it seems that the ways of thinking (and so, of knowing which object is being thought of) that underwrite bodily self-ascriptions are to supply this. The problem is that they cannot, for the reasons given in §§9-15.

23. It looks as if Evans’ account fails to do what it is meant to do. But perhaps it was never meant to do this. Notice what Evans has just said: “we secure no genuine ‘I think’ ... to accompany *his* thought” (my emphasis). That suggests that his account comes from the perspective of a theorist: its question is not whether someone can understand what he expresses with “I” as an *Art des Gegebenseins*, but whether we can describe “I” on his lips as expressing a way of thinking of an object (just as we did in §19 above, when we said that if someone thinks in the manner expressible by the first person, then he thinks in a manner that fixes it that he thinks of himself). If this is right, then his account is not meant to enable someone to acquire the kind of self-understanding sought for by *NN*.¹³

24. Evans seems to think that for someone’s use of “I” to be governed by a rule such as Anscombe’s is for him to actualize a certain intention: an intention to satisfy the one-place concept-expression “ ξ thinks of ξ ”. This supports the suggestion that Evans’ account was never meant to enable someone to acquire the kind of self-understanding sought for by *NN*. Suppose that *NN* self-ascribes this intention—by saying (as he would put it) “I intend to satisfy the one-place concept-expression ‘ ξ thinks of ξ ’”—and in so doing understands that this is what he is doing. He can only understand the actualization of the intention that he thereby self-ascribes to constitute a case of thinking of a specific object (and, as such, of knowing which object this is) if he can take himself to know not just that he thinks of a specific object in using “I”, but which object this is. And as yet he cannot take himself to

know these things—that was the upshot of the foregoing discussion. So, *NN* cannot attain the self-understanding that he seeks—one that makes it clear to him that, in using “I”, he thinks of an object, and knows which object this is—through self-ascribing this intention in the understanding that this is what he is doing. Perhaps a theorist could attain the very different understanding that interests him through ascribing this intention to *NN*, in the understanding that this is what *he* (the theorist) is doing: as the theorist already thinks of someone in the way associated with the name “*NN*”, and knows which object this is, ascribing this intention to *NN* will enable him to know not merely that *NN* thinks of an object in using “I”, but which object this is—namely, *NN*. But this is not the understanding that *NN* is looking for. Far from being an alternative to an understanding that is given from a theorist’s perspective, it seems that Evans’ account is an example of such an understanding—and consequently of no use to someone who seeks self-understanding of the present sort.

25. Evans seems to be conflicted as to whether his aim is to provide for speakers to have this self-understanding. Alongside the remarks cited in §21, he insists that the way of thinking that a speaker expresses with “I”—what Evans calls the speaker’s “Idea” of himself—“must comprise ... a knowledge of what it would be for an identity of the form $[I = \delta_i]$ to be true, where “ δ_i ” expresses a fundamental identification of a person: an identification of a person which—unlike [the speaker’s] ‘I’ identification—is of a kind which could be available to someone else” (1982, p. 209).¹⁴ That suggests that Evans is at least concerned with this self-understanding, for (as he realizes) if a speaker is to know what it is for an identity of the form $[I = \delta_i]$ to be true, the speaker needs to understand what he expresses with “I” as constituting knowledge of which object is being thought of—because only then can he understand what it is for what he expresses with a sentence with “I” as subject to be true; and only then can he understand what it is for a judgment of the form $[I = \delta_i]$ to be true. The problem is that this is an understanding that Evans has not provided for, and that it seems that no one can have.

26. Evans is uncharacteristically tentative about what his account achieves: he describes it as “only the most preliminary approach to this difficult subject” (1982, p. 255). Evans’ early death meant that he never managed to complete a final draft of the book (*The Varieties of Reference*) in which his account appears. And in his comments on the chapter in which it appears, the book’s editor, John McDowell, remarks that Evans came to think that the account was not “sufficient on its own to settle worries, like [Thomas] Nagel’s, about the possibility of identifying oneself with ... an element of the objective order” (1982, p. 265). It is a worry of just this sort that is at issue here. Nagel begins as *NN* did in §10: with the idea of something referred to in the manner associated with a proper name. And he soon becomes mystified as to how what he gets hold of with “I” can be identical to anything of that kind.¹⁵ As Nagel puts it: “I may ... see the world through the eyes of TN, but I can’t *be* TN” (1986, p. 55). (Is he afraid, or in ecstasy?) Nagel is at the stage at which *NN* found himself in §16: unable to make sense of how “I” expresses a way of thinking of an object, and yet still convinced that “I” expresses a way of thinking of (as he would put it) “me”. Just like *NN*, Nagel feels the temptation to say: “I am not *an object*, I am not something in the world; I am *the subject*”. And because he thinks that TN is something in the world, he is thereby assailed by the temptation to say: “I can’t *be* TN”. Anscombe would not deny that Nagel’s worry embodies an insight. And yet she would think that it is an example of (what she calls) “raving”. After considering the temptation to come out with something on the lines of “I am not *an object*; I am *the subject*”, Anscombe makes the following remark: “So long we adhere to the [assumption] that ‘I’ is a referring expression ... you will get the deep division between those whose considerations show that they have not perceived the difficulty—for them ‘I’ is in principle no different from my ‘A’; and those who would—or do—perceive the difference and are led to rave in consequence” (1975, p. 32). Anscombe’s “A” is a device that she introduces to bring out a problem with an explanation of the meaning of “I” that simply says that its use conforms to her rule. She invites us imagine the following scenario. There is a manifold of twenty-four speakers, each of which has a name that is not shared by any other member of the manifold. These names are the letters of the alphabet from “B” to “C”. And

each one of these names refers to its bearer in the way associated with proper names, described in §11. But in addition to their names, each speaker also uses a device, “A”, which refers to its speaker in the way associated with proper names. As “A” refers to its speaker, it follows that its use conforms to the rule for “I”. But as “A” refers in the manner of a proper name, it follows that it cannot be a version of “I”—for the reasons given in §11. Anscombe says that the idea of self-consciousness is the idea of “what is manifested by the use of ‘I’ as opposed to ‘A’” (1975, p. 25). And it is for this reason that she says that her description of this manifold of speakers “does not include self-consciousness” on their part. This absence of an inclusion of self-consciousness is reflected in the fact that, when we are asked to consider her “A”, we are asked to do so, not from within the self-consciousness of its users—for all that Anscombe has said, they do not have any—but from the perspective of a theorist. It is because Nagel proceeds entirely from within self-consciousness that he can perceive the difficulties. In this respect he is just like *NN*. And just like *NN* in §16, he is led to rave. For him to settle his worries, he would need to understand, from within, how it is that in using “I” he gets hold of “an element of the objective order”. He would need the kind of understanding that Anscombe enjoins us to make sense of, and that *NN* seeks. McDowell’s remarks suggest that Evans had come to see that the account he had given was not sufficient to supply this understanding.

27. Nagel’s raving is not unique to him. Philosophers and others humanistic thinkers are apt to engage in it: we find it (for example) in Musil, in Schopenhauer, in Thoreau, in at least a persona of Wittgenstein’s—and of course in *NN*.¹⁶ All assume that if they were to make an assertion with “I” as subject of the form “I am *b*” then they would express an identity-judgment—and, like Nagel, they are mystified as to how this judgment can be true when “*b*” names something given to the senses. Being able to see how mystifying this identity judgment would be if it were genuine is a mark of humanism—for it is a consequence of proceeding from within; whereas, being unable to see any mystery here is a mark of scientism—for it is a consequence of proceeding from the external perspective of a theorist.

Understanding Anscombe's argument requires being a humanist, for it requires proceeding from within self-consciousness. But to endorse the conclusion of her argument is, not to rave, but to recognize that "I is neither a name nor another kind of expression whose logical role is to make a reference, *at all*".

28. It is not only Anscombe who refuses to rave. Nor, finally, does *NN*. He tried to understand what he expresses with "I" as an *Art des Gegebenseins*—and we saw his failure to do so in §§9-17. That part of the story ended with *NN* recognizing his failure, and in its light abandoning the Fregean orthodoxy that he was trying to make sense of. And with this in mind, let us return to his journey.

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29. *NN* cannot see how to endorse the Fregean orthodoxy. But what is the alternative? He tries to answer this question by focusing on self-ascriptions: assertions of subject-predicate sentences with "I" as subject, which express self-consciousness. For the orthodoxy, a self-ascription is the expression of a singular thought whose subject-component is an *Art des Gegebenseins* associated with "I"; for example, "I am opening a window" expresses a singular thought that identifies someone in some way, and says of him that he is doing something. But, as *NN* can see, if a self-ascription was the expression of such a thought, then its content would have to get hold of its object in one of the ways described in §§9-12—either in the manner of a proper name, or in the manner of a demonstrative—and then it would not be an expression of self-consciousness, and so not a self-ascription.

30. This affords a negative characterization of self-ascription. It is not the expression of a thought the subject-component of which gets hold of an object in one of the ways specified in §§9-12. As a self-ascription, it expresses self-consciousness, but self-consciousness neither is, nor contains, an *Art des Gegebenseins*—on the contrary, it is (minimally) what is expressed

with “I”, insofar as what is expressed with “I” does not amount to a way of thinking of an object at all. And for this reason—paradoxical as it may sound—a self-ascription is not a kind of ascription, insofar as an ascription is an assertion that expresses a singular thought.

31. This is not to deny that assertions of subject-predicate sentences with “I” as subject fall under Anscombe’s rule. So, there is nothing here to unsettle the familiar inferential profile of these assertions. *NN* can grant that if someone asserts “I am opening the window” then his assertion is true just in case what he asserts is true of him. So characterized, this assertion might be an expression of self-consciousness; but equally it might not be, for it is consistent with its falling under the rule that it deploys “I” as a demonstrative, or as a name—that is, as a device that expresses a way of thinking that exemplifies one of the manners of thinking described in §§9-12.¹⁷ Then it would express a *bona fide* singular thought—and so, it would not be a self-ascription. By contrast, if the assertion is a genuine self-ascription, then it does not serve to identify someone, and to ascribe the predicate “opening the window” to him. The assertion is true just in case the one who makes it satisfies this predicate. But—unlike when the assertion expresses a singular thought—a way of thinking of the one in question is no part of what it expresses.

32. As *NN* acknowledges this, he sees that the assertion “I am *NN*” is itself merely an assertion that falls under a rule of language that parallels Anscombe’s rule: if someone asserts something with “I” as subject of the form “I am *b*” then his assertion is true just in case he is identical to *b*. The raver in *NN* wants to say more: that when he makes this assertion he expresses an identity-judgment in which he thinks of (as he wants to say) “myself”, and says of the one he thereby identifies that he is *NN*. But he can see that there is nothing more to say. The assertion is true just in case the one who makes it is *NN*. And as before, a way of thinking of the one in question is no part of its content.

33. Anscombe's discussion of assertions of the form "I am *b*" is the only section of her essay that is consistently written in the first person. And it seems that this is because, in this section, she is exploiting (what we might call) the addressing function of "I": its role of indicating something *to* another—namely, which one it is upon which the assertion turns for its truth.¹⁸ Her first personal mode of expression can make it look as if in making assertions such as "I am EA", or "I am this body here" she is thinking of (as she would put it) "myself", and implying something about the one thereby identified (minimally, that the truth of their assertions turn on how things stand with EA, or with "this body here").¹⁹ But this cannot be how Anscombe sees things. The assertions conform to the rule of language introduced in §32, but that is all.

34. That is her position, and she captures it by saying that "I" is not a referring expression. In saying this, Anscombe is not denying her rule, or the parallel rule described in §32. But she is denying that assertions with "I" as subject contain identifying knowledge of which object is being thought of. And in denying this, she leaves us with a task.

35. Back in §9, it was noted that a common reaction for at least certain people to have on being confronted with Anscombe's remark that "I" is not a referring expression is to say (something like): "When I use 'I', it refers to *me*". As the one who says this says "me", he will accompany his utterance with a pointing gesture—the base of his finger facing away from him, and its tip facing towards him; and it is not unnatural to take him to understand his gesture as manifesting the identifying knowledge that is contained in the way of thinking that he expresses with "I". In this paper, we have considered someone who took this understanding for granted, called him "*NN*", and followed him as he tried to make sense of what he expresses with "I": first, as a way of thinking of a human being (§§10-12); and when that failed, as a way of thinking of a Cartesian Ego (§§13-16)—and when that failed, we watched him degenerate into raving (§17). The moral that *NN* draws from his progress is that what he expresses with "I" is not an *Art des Gegebenseins* at all. And that is the moral that

Anscombe wants everyone to draw. Anscombe need not deny that the pointing gesture manifests identifying knowledge; but she would insist that this is knowledge contained in what is expressed by the demonstrative expression “this body”, or “this human being”, rather than in what is expressed by “I”. However, Anscombe does want to insist that someone who makes this gesture can know (as he would put it) “I am this body”. And on the face of it, this is puzzling, for what he expresses in those words does seem to be an identity-judgment—and yet, it cannot be this if what he expresses with “I” does not constitute identifying knowledge. Anscombe, of course, insists that it is not an identity-judgment. But that does not make the puzzle go away—it compounds it. No identifying knowledge is internal to any use of “I”. But then it seems that, from the standpoint of what is internal to a use of “I”, what “I” expresses does not concern anyone at all. Of course, it is possible from outside of this standpoint to assign a truth condition to a use of a sentence with “I” as subject, by means of Anscombe’s rule, and in this light to count the use of the sentence as concerning the one who figures as the referent of the device in subject-position in the specification of this condition. But that is to proceed from the external perspective of a theorist; from the standpoint of the self-consciousness that is internal to the use of “I”, what “I” expresses does not concern anyone at all. Or so it seems. But then it is a real question what sense can be made, from this standpoint, of what is expressed by a sentence such as “I am this body”, or “I am *NN*”. It seems that whatever is in view from this standpoint is an essential aspect of what it is for anyone to understand himself as a body—indeed, as a human being—at all. But what could this understanding come to, if Anscombe is right that “‘I’ is neither a name nor another kind of expression whose logical role is to make a reference, *at all*”? It is, I think, because Evans saw the difficulty of this question that he thought that Anscombe must be wrong about “I”. But she is not wrong. So, the question remains. The task that her essay sets us is to understand—and perhaps to try to answer—this difficult question.

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¹ For "extraordinary", see Evans, 1982, p. 214.

² I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this description of what the paper is trying to do.

³ Anscombe, 1976, p. 55. (This is a very important essay for understanding Anscombe's work on "I".)

⁴ For two recent examples, see Rumfitt, 1994 and O'Brien, 1994. Rumfitt is explicitly not trying to show that a use of a sentence with "I" as subject contains identifying knowledge of which object is being referred to. As he puts it: although a use of such a sentence is constituted by the speaker's "intention to refer to himself", in forming this intention the

speaker “need not form an intention to refer to such and such, where the speaker could (if called upon to do so) pick out such and such from among its own kind” (1994, p. 635). If the actualization of the speaker’s intention contained identifying knowledge of which object is being referred to, then the speaker could pick out the object in just this way. As it does not, and as the speaker’s use of a sentence with “I” as subject is constituted by the actualization of this intention, so this use equally does not contain this knowledge. By Rumfitt’s own lights, “I” is not a referring expression, in the sense that interests Anscombe. O’Brien’s position, by contrast, is closer to that of Evans. She thinks that for “I” to be used as a device of (what she calls) “self-conscious self-reference”, the speaker must use “I” in the knowledge that (as he would put it) “I am using ‘I’”; and she thinks that this knowledge must contain an *Art des Gegebenseins*, and as such must contain identifying knowledge, associated with the speaker’s use of “I”. As O’Brien puts it: “our capacity to use ‘I’ as expressive of self-conscious self-reference rests on an, as yet unexplained, prior first personal identification of ourselves in thought” (1994, p. 280). But O’Brien does not think that Anscombe’s argument is directed against the very idea of such a “first personal identification ... in thought”. On the contrary: O’Brien thinks that understanding what (if anything) this identification comes to is the task that “Anscombe’s arguments seem to leave us with” (1994, p. 281). But that was her task all along. O’Brien seems to think that Anscombe’s target is an idea that holds at the level of language, but not at the level of thought. But there is nothing in Anscombe’s essay (or in her work more generally) to suggest that she is operating with this distinction. To suppose that “I” is a referring expression, in the sense that interests Anscombe, is to suppose that “I” expresses a way of thinking of an object—and in the phrase “‘I’ expresses a way of thinking of an object”, considerations of language and thought come together. Anscombe’s target is an idea that holds at the level of language, and as such at the level of thought (and vice versa).

⁵ Apart from the present paper, I do not know of a single example in the literature that does this.

⁶ The learning here would be a matter of acquiring knowledge either through observation, or through testimony from those who themselves acquired the knowledge through observation. To think of the phrase “human being” as signifying a kind under which a body could in this manner be learned to fall would be to think of it as expressing an “empirical concept”, as opposed to the “non-empirical concept” that Michael Thompson thinks the same phrase must also express insofar as it figures in the fundamental propositions of ethical knowledge. For this idea, see Thompson, 2004.

⁷ Compare Evans, 1982, especially chapter 6, and Rödl, 2007, especially chapter 1.

⁸ Compare Anscombe’s discussion of the private language argument, in Anscombe, 1976.

⁹ As Anscombe puts it, “we have [here] as it were an example of language possessed of an imagination, forcing its image upon us” (1975, p. 32).

¹⁰ On the idea of expressing the way someone thinks of something by saying what he thinks of, see Evans 1981, p. 295.

¹¹ It may be that Evans thinks of these ways of knowing as something other than modes of presence to consciousness (contrary to what their names suggest). But it is impossible to know, because Evans does not say what they are, in such a way as to reveal them to be capable of enabling *NN* (or anyone) to understand what he expresses with “I” as an *Art des Gegebenseins*.

¹² Exactly how to handle this idea is a matter of a dispute; for two different handlings, see on the one hand Byrne, 2011, and on the other Rödl, 2007.

¹³ This is not to dismiss what Evans says about mental self-ascription, which could illuminatingly figure in a positive account of self-ascription understood in a non-Fregean manner (see §§29-31). This is the best frame in which to understand, not only these remarks of Evans’s, but also what Anscombe says about “practical knowledge” in Anscombe, 1963. The first two chapters of Rödl, 2007 seek to articulate these two forms of self-consciousness: determining what to believe, through theoretical reasoning (Evans’s concern), and determining what to do, through practical reasoning (Anscombe’s concern). Rödl is clearly after self-understanding—but he also makes it look as if he is discharging Evans’s orthodox project. If what is said here is right, then these cannot go together. But there is a better way of understanding what he is doing in these chapters.

¹⁴ Evans, 1982, p. 209; here by an “I-identification” Evans means the way of thinking that constitutes knowledge of which object is being thought of that a speaker expresses with “I”. Unlike Evans, Rumfitt does not seek to provide for “I-identifications” in this sense.

¹⁵ Evans encountered this worry in Nagel, 1979. But for its most thorough presentation, see Nagel’s marvellous essay “The Objective Self”, in Nagel, 1986.

¹⁶ Each comes out with some version of “I can’t *be* TN”, but for different reasons: in the case of Schopenhauer (in Schopenhauer, 1966) and Wittgenstein’s persona (in Wittgenstein, 1961), the reasons are of the philosophical sort considered in §§9-17; in the case of Musil (in Musil, 1997 and Thoreau (in Thoreau, 1854) they are more sensuous in character—turning on a historical fact in the former case (the anomie suffered by intellectuals after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian empire), and a geographical fact in the latter (the emptiness felt by those who spend too much time alone in the woods).

¹⁷ “If this were the only name anyone had, the situation would be worse than it is for a bank in a Welsh village” (Anscombe, 1975, p. 23).

¹⁸ See Clarke, 1978.

¹⁹ Anscombe claims that the second of these assertions could be false—and Anthony Kenny worries how this could be (see Kenny, 1979). Obviously it could not be because the one identified by the subject-component of the thought it expresses might be other than the one upon which it turns for its truth—for it expresses no such thought. Kenny wonders whether it could be because the one upon which it turns for its truth might be other than the one who makes the assertion. But that cannot be right either, because it would violate the rule of language for “I”. The answer is that the assertion might be false because the one that it demonstrates—namely, “this body here”—could be other than the one who makes it. “[I]magination makes something of [that] idea” (Anscombe, 1975, p. 33): just picture a simple science fiction scenario in which the one who makes the assertion is in a control tower, and the one who produces the noises that (so to speak) broadcast it is on the ground, and “this body here” picks out the latter. Someone who thinks that someone standing before her might be such a conduit could wonder as to the truth of the assertion that is being broadcast by the noises—for she could wonder whether the one making the assertion is “that body there”.