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‘Two Kinds of Use of “I”’: The Middle Wittgenstein on ‘I’ and the Self

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In his writings and lectures in the early 1930s, Wittgenstein deals extensively with the topic of ‘personal experience’¹: the ascription of sensations and experiences to oneself and others. That was one of the earliest topics he wrote about when he returned to philosophy in 1929. And it remained a central preoccupation throughout the early 1930s: important treatments can be found in *Philosophical Remarks*²; in G. E. Moore’s notes of Wittgenstein’s Lent Term 1933 lectures³; in the *Big Typescript*, from summer 1933⁴; and in the *Blue Book*, the relevant parts of which date from Lent Term 1934⁵. There are differences in his various treatments of the topic as his work developed, as well as many points of continuity. But the work is characterized by two consistent concerns. First, Wittgenstein aims to achieve a reflective understanding of the relation between the first-person and third-person uses of sensation words: an account that captures what is distinctive about the first-person case whilst doing justice to the reality of others’ minds. Second, his discussion of personal experience is interwoven with the examination and repudiation of a kind of solipsism that naturally tempts us, he thinks, when we try to articulate what is distinctive about our own experience: a kind of solipsism that Wittgenstein characterizes in the slogan ‘only my experience is real’.⁶

I shall concentrate on one element in these Middle Period writings on personal experience: Wittgenstein’s treatment of ‘I’ and the self. One reason for paying special attention to that topic is that the Middle Period writings record a much more detailed engagement with this issue than the cursory discussion in

¹ BLBK, 44.

² PR, 88-96.

³ M, Lent Term 1933, Lectures 5b-9, 7:109 to 8:57, pp. 266-304.

⁴ BT, 356-62.

⁵ BLBK, 44-74.

⁶ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6a, 8:6, p. 273. For similar formulations see BLBK, 58-66, 71-2.

Philosophical Investigations.⁷ A second reason is that the Middle Period writings have had a direct influence on discussions of ‘I’ and the self in the philosophy of mind and language more generally. Positively, the *Blue Book* distinction between the use of ‘I’ as subject and the use of ‘I’ as object stimulated influential discussions of self-knowledge by Sydney Shoemaker and Gareth Evans⁸. And it is the basis for contemporary discussions of the phenomenon of immunity to error through misidentification – a kind of immunity which, Evans says, was ‘noticed by Wittgenstein for the first time’ and is ‘central to the notion of self-consciousness’⁹. More negatively, some of the views about the use of ‘I’ that G. E. Moore reported in his published account of Wittgenstein’s 1933 lectures¹⁰ were sharply criticized by P. F. Strawson and by Shoemaker as being at best confused and at worst incoherent.¹¹ The publication of the full text of Moore’s notes gives us the opportunity to study in detail what Wittgenstein said in the 1933 lectures and to reassess his Middle Period treatment of the self and the first person more generally. I shall focus on two features of that treatment.

First, I discuss the distinction Wittgenstein draws in the 1933 lectures between ‘2 utterly different ways’ in which we use the word ‘I’¹². What distinction, exactly, does Wittgenstein have in mind; and is it defensible? I show that Wittgenstein describes what are, on the face of it, a number of different and non-equivalent distinctions between uses of ‘I’. In some cases, his views are defensible, but in others his reasoning is unconvincing. Second, I discuss the *Blue Book* distinction between the use of ‘I’ as subject and the use of ‘I’ as object.¹³ The secondary literature on that distinction has a curious feature. In the literature on the self and self-consciousness, what Wittgenstein says about the as-subject/as-object distinction and immunity to error through misidentification is seen as an important insight. In the literature on Wittgenstein, on the other hand, a number of writers who are usually sympathetic to his work have argued that the *Blue Book* distinction between uses of ‘I’ is erroneous, that Wittgenstein soon realized that, and that he

⁷ PI, §§402-411.

⁸ See Shoemaker 1968 and Evans 1982, 215-220.

⁹ Evans 1982, 217, 218. The phrase ‘immunity to error through misidentification’ first appears in Shoemaker 1968.

¹⁰ MWL, 100-102.

¹¹ See Strawson 1959, 94-8, Shoemaker 1968, 555-6.

¹² M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 7b, 8:31, p. 288.

¹³ BB, 66-7.

dropped the idea of such a distinction from his later work.¹⁴ Against those claims, I shall defend the distinction between the use of ‘I’ as subject and its use as object; and I shall argue that, though we do not find the ‘as-subject’/‘as-object’ terminology in Wittgenstein’s later work, the essential point of the distinction is not abandoned but remains in place in *Philosophical Investigations*.

1. The 1933 Lectures: Two ‘utterly different’ uses of ‘I’

Moore’s notes of Wittgenstein’s lecture of March 6, 1933 begin with a comment summarizing points made in the previous lecture: ‘2 kinds of use [of] “I” – or any word denoting “subject”’.¹⁵ Later in the same lecture Wittgenstein says:

We could say ‘the subject’ is used in 2 different ways: (1) for the whole or a part of the human body (2) for something quite different.¹⁶

In an earlier lecture, on February 27, he says that in this second use of ‘I’, for something other than a human body, ‘I does not denote a possessor’.¹⁷ ‘I’ in ‘I have toothache’, for instance, ‘does not refer to a person’.¹⁸ The implication, though Wittgenstein does not explicitly spell it out in these words, is that in its first use, where ‘I’ is used for a human body, it does refer to a person: the person who is individuated by reference to that human body.

Against these claims, critics have argued that there is no use of ‘I’ that fails to refer to the person who produced it. On the contrary, ‘the first personal pronoun refers, on each occasion of its use, to whoever then uses it’.¹⁹ The idea that ‘there are two uses of “I”, in one of which it denotes something which it does not denote in the other’²⁰ is simply a mistake. In particular, it is not true that ‘I’ in ‘I have toothache’ does not denote a person: a particular human being. Of course, as Wittgenstein points out, ‘my decision whether I have tooth-ache or not is *not* made by reference to any body’²¹; in reaching the judgement ‘I have toothache’, I do not need to identify

¹⁴ See Hacker 1990, 483-6; Glock 1996, 160-4; Glock and Hacker 1996, 100; Bakhurst 2001, 232; De Gaynesford 2017, 486-7.

¹⁵ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:32, p. 289.

¹⁶ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:35, p. 291.

¹⁷ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 7a, 8:23, p. 283.

¹⁸ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 7a, 8:22, p. 283.

¹⁹ Strawson 1994, 210. For other statements of the same view see e.g. Shoemaker 1968, 566; Barwise and Perry 1981, 670; Kaplan 1989, 505.

²⁰ Strawson 1959, 98.

²¹ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:32, p. 289.

myself on the basis of my bodily characteristics. But, the critics say, Wittgenstein is wrong to move from that perfectly correct observation to the conclusion that ‘I in ‘I have toothache’ does not refer to the person who produces it.

That criticism is very natural. What, then, leads Wittgenstein to think that, as well as the use of ‘I’ that refers to a person or a human body, there is another use of ‘I’ ‘for something else’? We can distinguish four lines of thought in the 1933 lectures that lead him to this view.

First, Wittgenstein is moved by a phenomenological point. In a remark written in February 1930, and included in *Philosophical Remarks*, he writes:

The experience of feeling pain is not that a person ‘I’ has something.

I distinguish an intensity, a location, etc. in the pain, but not an owner.²²

He makes the same point in the 1933 lectures:

[I]f we describ[e] an experience such as having tooth-ache or seeing a red patch, the idea of a person doesn’t enter into the description just as an eye doesn’t enter into description of what’s seen.²³

Of course, as Wittgenstein observes, ‘[i]n ordinary language we do use “I have toothache” when we are reporting toothache.’²⁴ But, he insists, the ‘I’ in ‘I have toothache’ does not correspond to any element in the experience itself. So, if we want to give what Wittgenstein calls a ‘description of primary experience’,²⁵ an accurate characterization of the intrinsic character of our experience, we have two options. We could report our experience in a way that eliminates the first-person pronoun altogether: replacing ‘I have toothache’ with ‘There is tooth-ache here’.²⁶

Alternatively, we could stick with the ordinary way of expressing our experience – ‘I have toothache’ – but acknowledge that, *when that sentence is used as a ‘description of primary experience’*, ‘I’ does not function to denote a person; for no person figures in the content of the experience of toothache. If we agree with Wittgenstein that there is such a thing as the project of describing primary experience, conceived in this way, then his point about the use of ‘I’ in such descriptions is a reasonable one. Note, too, that the point is compatible with accepting that there is a different use of ‘I

²² PR, 94.

²³ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6b, 8:8, p. 274. See also Lecture 7a, 8:23, p. 283.

²⁴ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6b, 8:8, p. 274.

²⁵ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6b, 8:8, p. 274.

²⁶ For this proposal in the 1933 lectures, see M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 5b, 7:114, p. 269; also, the reference to Lichtenberg, at Lecture 7b, 8:29, p. 287. For earlier statements of the same suggestion, see PR, 88-9; and BT, 360.

have toothache’ – to answer the question ‘who, of a number of people, has toothache’²⁷ – and that in that use of the sentence, ‘I’ does refer to a person.

A second line of thought in the 1933 lectures arises from the question, whether thoughts and experiences essentially have a subject. If the word ‘subject’ is used for a human being, Wittgenstein argues, then it is true that every experience is had by a subject. But that is a merely contingent truth; there could be experiences that did not depend on physical bodies at all. But, he thinks, we can use the word ‘subject’ in a second sense, for something other than a human being; and in this second sense of ‘subject’, it is a necessary truth that every experience is had by a subject.

Wittgenstein explains the point with an analogy. The existence of visual experiences depends on a physical eye. But that is only a contingent truth; there could be visual experiences even if there were no physical eyes at all. As Wittgenstein puts it, ‘There is no organ of vision essential: no physical eye is necessary’.²⁸ But, he says, we can use the word ‘eye’ in a different sense, for what he calls ‘the eye of [the] visual field’²⁹. And the idea that the visual field involves an eye *in that sense* captures an essential feature of visual experience: ‘[V]isual field has certain internal properties, such that you can describe motion of a ring as motion towards the eye. (not physical eye)’.³⁰

Similar ideas appear at various points throughout the lectures. For instance:

There is an eye in visual-field: i.e. a particular property of visual field – that of ring approaching.³¹

[W]e can in geometry of visual space speak of an ‘eye’, but this wouldn’t involve a physical body, nor is it a matter of experience; we can talk of motions away from & towards the eye . . . ³²

It would be nonsense to say: ‘I could perfectly imagine that there was no eye in visual space’: this would alter geometry of visual space.³³

Saying that visual experience essentially involves an eye in this sense is a way of identifying an essential property of the visual field: the property that David Pears

²⁷ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:32, p. 289.

²⁸ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6a, 8:2, p. 270.

²⁹ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6a, 8:8, p. 217.

³⁰ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6a, 8:2, p. 271.

³¹ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6a, 8:4, pp. 271.

³² M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6b, 8:8, p. 274.

³³ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:36, p. 292.

expresses by saying that visual experience ‘is had from a point of view which is not represented in that experience’.³⁴

The distinction Wittgenstein draws in the 1933 lectures between the physical eye and the eye of the visual field is the same as the distinction he draws in the *Blue Book* between the physical eye and the geometrical eye.³⁵ And just as in the *Blue Book*, the distinction is used in the lectures to explain a more general distinction between two uses of ‘I’ or ‘subject’: its use for ‘the whole or a part of the human body’ and its use ‘for something different’. This ‘2nd use of “subject”’, he explains, ‘always refers to a particular property of some space, auditory, visual, or space of tooth-ache’.³⁶ Thus, just as talk of the visual eye refers to an essential property of visual experience, so talk of the geometrical subject, as we might call it, refers to an essential property of experience in general.

The notion of the visual eye is an essentially spatial one; the visual eye is the point of origin of the visual field. The idea of the ‘auditory ear’ is, similarly, to be understood in spatial terms; it is the center of auditory space.³⁷ That might lead us to expect that when ‘I’ is used for the ‘geometrical’ subject it will pick out a spatial property of experience in general: the geometrical subject will be the point of origin of the space of experience as a whole. But Wittgenstein does not develop the notion in that way, for at least two reasons. First, he argues that it is not an essential feature of experience that the experiences enjoyed by a single subject – visual, auditory, tactile and so on – should share a single point of origin. ‘We have a feeling that tactile & visual space are one; but . . . this correlation is not necessary’.³⁸ Second, he argues that some of the properties that we ascribe to a subject do not have any spatial component at all:

Is there ‘a head’ involved in thinking, as there is an ‘eye’ involved in visual space?

Thinking may take place nowhere in physical space.³⁹

What, then, is the essential property of experience in general that we refer to when we use the term ‘I’ or ‘subject’ to talk of the geometrical subject? Wittgenstein

³⁴ Pears 1987, 165.

³⁵ BLBK, 63-4.

³⁶ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8: 36, p. 291.

³⁷ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:35, p. 291.

³⁸ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 6a, 8:5, p. 272.

³⁹ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:37, p. 292.

suggests at one point that ‘I’ in this use is equivalent to ‘conscious’⁴⁰: to say that toothache or visual experience essentially involve a subject is simply to say that they are conscious phenomena: that they are experiences.

When he is speaking in this vein, then, what Wittgenstein means when he says that there is a use of ‘I’ in which ‘I’ does not denote a person is that we can use ‘I’ for the geometrical subject; in that use, it denotes an essential, structural feature of experience rather than an entity that has experiences. That, again, is a perfectly reasonable point, when we understand what Wittgenstein means by it. That said, it is hard to believe that there are any ordinary, non-philosophical cases in which ‘I’ is used for the geometrical subject in Wittgenstein’s sense; such a use of ‘I’ plausibly occurs only in contexts of philosophical reflection. But even if this second use of ‘I’ is a purely philosophical phenomenon, that does not mean that it is in itself confused.

A third line of thought in the 1933 lectures proceeds from reflections on the way in which we individuate persons. As things are, Wittgenstein thinks, the identity of subjects of experience is tied to the identity of human beings: the thoughts and experiences of a single person are causally dependent on, and causally expressed through, a single human body; so the identity of a person, both at a time and over time, never comes apart from the identity of a human being. But we can easily imagine different patterns of connections between human bodies, experiences, and action that would lead us to individuate people in other ways. Thus, for instance, Wittgenstein describes a situation in which he thinks it would be reasonable to say that I have changed my body:

Can’t it be imagined that I lived all my life opposite a mirror, & saw faces in it, without knowing which was mine?

Suppose I saw 4 bodies. It is describable that I should change my body.

When one moved its arm, I should have a certain feeling; & when another did,

I should have same feeling: this would describe ‘having changed my body’.⁴¹

And, more radically, he imagines the possibility of having experiences without having a body at all: ‘I might have tooth-ache, even if there were no body – if my body was destroyed’.⁴² In describing these situations, he thinks, I am using ‘I’ in a perfectly legitimate way to talk about myself and about possible situations in which I would

⁴⁰ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 7b, 8:30, p. 287.

⁴¹ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 5b, 7:111, p. 267.

⁴² M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:32, p. 289.

exist. But I am evidently not using ‘I’ to refer to a particular human being; for the possible situations I am describing are ones in which I would exist but would have no association with the particular human being with which I am currently associated. The description of such cases, he thinks, illustrates the use of ‘I’ for something other than a human being. Wittgenstein does not mention Locke. But the view he describes is strongly reminiscent of Locke’s view that ‘I’ can be used in two ways: to refer to a human being or to refer to a person, where the continued existence of the person is separable from that of the human being.⁴³

Wittgenstein’s reasoning here is not persuasive. In the first place, the mere fact that we can describe a situation without evident absurdity (‘I might have toothache even if . . . my body was destroyed’, say) does not show that the initial description can be filled out in detail in a way that remains coherent. And even if we can coherently describe a situation, that does not show that it is really possible. But supposing we accept that the situations Wittgenstein describes are really possible. The fact that there is some counterfactual situation in which we would use ‘I’ to refer to something other than a human being does not show that, as things are, ‘I’ is ever used in such a way. At best, this part of Wittgenstein’s case for saying that there is a use of ‘I’ for ‘something different’ from a human being is underdeveloped.⁴⁴ Notice also that even if we accept Wittgenstein’s neo-Lockean case for saying that ‘I’ can be used in two different ways – to refer to a human being or to refer to a person – this distinction between uses of ‘I’ is entirely different from the distinctions explored in the first two lines of thought. Amongst other things, it obviously provides no rationale for the claim that ‘I’ in ‘I have toothache’ does not refer to a person.

A final, and related, line of thought in the 1933 lectures involves the consideration of statements like ‘I have a body’ and ‘This body is my body’. The intelligibility of such statements, Wittgenstein argues, shows once more that there is a use of ‘I’ or ‘my’ that functions in some way other than to refer to a human being. He argues thus:

I call a certain human body ‘my body’; & the body to which my nose is attached, could be called its possessor.

⁴³ See Locke 1689, Book II, chapter xxvii, §20.

⁴⁴ For related objections to the claim that thought experiments like Wittgenstein’s can force us to acknowledge that there is a use of ‘I’ for something other than a human person, see Strawson 1994, 212-14.

Suppose I saw human bodies only in a mirror, & gave them names A, B, C, D, I could talk of ‘A’s nose’ etc.; & so if I called one of them ‘me’, I could talk of ‘my nose’.

But it would be utterly different if I said ‘This is my body’: I’m not mentioning a possessor of it, as of the nose.⁴⁵

We can spell out Wittgenstein’s reasoning. In ‘This nose is my nose’, we can treat the word ‘my’ as picking out a human body. What the sentence says is that this nose belongs to – i.e. is attached to, or is a part of – the human body to which ‘my’ refers. But we cannot treat ‘This body is my body’ in the same way: as saying that this body belongs to the human body to which ‘my’ refers. For that would come to saying that this body belongs to this body. And, Wittgenstein thinks, if x belongs to y, y must be a different thing from x: the relation of owning or belonging to, he says, requires ‘a correlation of 2 things’.⁴⁶ He illustrates that point with another example:

If you called my voice Wittgenstein, we could ask which body belongs to Wittgenstein, but then we couldn’t ask which voice belongs to Wittgenstein.⁴⁷

Wittgenstein’s argument is unconvincing. It is true that there can be situations where there is a genuine question whether some particular body is *my* body. For example, I might see a number of bodies in a mirror and be unsure which body is mine; the proposition ‘*That* body is my body’ is cognitively significant, in a way that the propositions ‘My body is my body’ and ‘That body is that body’ are not. It does not follow that the ‘my’ in ‘my body’, or the ‘I’ in ‘I have a body’, refers to anything other than a human being. Nor should we endorse the general principle that, if x belongs to y, then y must be distinct from x. A company that holds all its own shares owns itself; the company belongs to the company. Similarly, ‘I have a body’ can be understood perfectly well without supposing that ‘I’ refers to something distinct from my body.

It is time to take stock. Wittgenstein distinguishes in the 1933 lectures between ‘2 kinds of use of “I” – or any word denoting “subject”’.⁴⁸ ‘I’ is sometimes used ‘for the whole or a part of the human body’; at other times, it is used ‘for

⁴⁵ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 7a, 8:23-4, p. 283. For similar considerations see Lecture 7b, 8:27, pp. 285-6, and 8:29-30, p. 287.

⁴⁶ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 7b, 8:29, 287.

⁴⁷ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 7b, 8:30, p. 287.

⁴⁸ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:32, p. 289.

something else’.⁴⁹ The discussion is complex and Wittgenstein develops a number of different reasons for saying that there is a use of ‘I’ ‘where there is no question of a body’. On the face of it, he is not drawing a single distinction, but identifying a number of different cases in which ‘I’, on his view, does not refer to a human body. (1) There is the idea that, when ‘I’ is used in a description of immediate experience, it does not pick out anything at all and could be omitted without loss. (2) There is the idea that ‘I’ can be used for the geometrical subject, just as ‘eye’ can be used for the visual eye. In this use, Wittgenstein says, ‘I’ ‘always refers to a particular property of some space’: e.g. auditory space, visual space, or the ‘space of toothache’. (3) There is the idea that ‘I’ can be used to pick out a subject that could in principle swap bodies, or continue to exist without a body. (4) There is the idea that ‘I’ and ‘my’ in ‘I have a body’ or ‘This body is my body’ pick out something that *has* a body, which cannot simply *be* a human body.

Some of Wittgenstein’s reasoning, I have said, is unconvincing. In particular, the arguments behind points (3) and (4) do not give us good reason for thinking that ‘I’ ever actually refers to something other than a human being. In the case of points (1) and (2), by contrast, once we are clear about what Wittgenstein is saying and why he says it, we can agree that, in the uses of ‘I’ he is describing, ‘I’ is indeed used for something other than a human being. Arguably, however, those uses of ‘I’ do not occur in ordinary language but arise only in the context of one or another distinctively philosophical project: describing the intrinsic character of immediate experience, in the case of point (1); articulating what is essential to the nature of thought and experience, in the case of point (2). The fact that, when engaged in these projects, we may find ourselves using ‘I’ in those ways does not show that, in ordinary language, we ever use ‘I’ in a way that does not refer to a human being.

2. The *Blue Book*: The use of ‘I’ as subject and the use of ‘I’ as object

In the course of the extended *Blue Book* discussion of the self and solipsism, Wittgenstein draws two distinctions between different uses of ‘I’. In the first place, there is a distinction between the use of ‘I’ for the physical subject and the use of ‘I’

⁴⁹ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 8a, 8:35, p. 291.

for the geometrical subject.⁵⁰ The distinction is introduced by reference to the same analogy with two uses of ‘eye’ that Wittgenstein employs in the 1933 lectures. And the *Blue Book* distinction is clearly the same as the corresponding distinction in the 1933 lectures. In the second place, the *Blue Book* introduces a distinction between the use of ‘I’ as subject and the use of ‘I’ as object.⁵¹ What exactly is this second distinction? Is it defensible? How does it relate to the distinction between the use of ‘I’ for the physical subject and for the geometrical subject? And how does it relate to the treatment of ‘I’ in Wittgenstein’s later work?

The distinction between the use of ‘I’ as subject and the use of ‘I’ as object is introduced in the following passage:

There are two different cases in the use of the word ‘I’ (or ‘my’) which I might call ‘the use as object’ and ‘the use as subject’. Examples of the first kind of use are these: ‘My arm is broken’, ‘I have grown six inches’, ‘I have a bump on my forehead’, ‘The wind blows my hair about’. Examples of the second kind are: ‘I see so-and-so’, ‘I hear so-and-so’, ‘I try to lift my arm’, ‘I think it will rain’, ‘I have toothache’. One can point to the difference between these two categories by saying: The cases of the first category involve the recognition of a particular person, and there is in these cases the possibility of an error, or as I should rather put it: The possibility of an error has been provided for. . . . It is possible that, say in an accident, I should feel a pain in my arm, see a broken arm at my side, and think it is mine, when really it is my neighbour’s. And I could, looking into a mirror, mistake a bump on his forehead for one on mine. On the other hand, there is no question of recognizing a person when I say I have toothache. To ask ‘are you sure that it’s *you* who have pains?’ would be nonsensical. Now, when in this case no error is possible, it is because the move which we might be inclined to think of as an error, a ‘bad move’, is no move of the game at all. . . . And now this way of stating our idea suggests itself: that it is as impossible that in making the statement ‘I have toothache’ I should have

⁵⁰ BLBK: 63-4. Wittgenstein himself does not use the terms ‘physical subject’ and ‘geometrical subject’ in the passage concerned. But he does use the terms ‘physical eye’ and ‘geometrical eye’, and the distinction between those two senses of ‘eye’ is clearly intended as an analogy for a distinction between two senses of ‘I’ or ‘subject’.

⁵¹ BLBK: 66-7.

mistaken another person for myself, as it is to moan with pain by mistake, having mistaken someone else for me.⁵²

In the literature on self-knowledge and self-reference, most writers have taken issue with Wittgenstein’s apparent view (which emerges in the wider context of the quoted passage) that a person who uses ‘I’ as subject does not thereby *refer* to herself. But his observations that judgements in which ‘I’ is used as subject do not involve the recognition of a person, and that they enjoy a distinctive kind of immunity - immunity to error through misidentification – have been regarded as important insights. As Wittgenstein observes, when I judge ‘I have a broken arm’ in the circumstances he describes, it is possible for me to be right in thinking that *someone’s* arm is broken but wrong in thinking that it is *me* whose arm is broken. No error of that kind is possible for the judgement ‘I have toothache’.

Wittgenstein’s examples of the use of ‘I’ as object all involve self-ascriptions of physical properties (‘My arm is broken’, ‘I have grown six inches’, etc.). Similarly, his examples of as-subject uses of ‘I’ all involve self-ascriptions of mental properties (‘I see so-and-so’, ‘I think it will rain’ etc.). Many commentators have concluded that, for Wittgenstein, the as-object use of ‘I’ just is its use in self-ascriptions of physical properties and the as-subject use of ‘I’ just is its use in self-ascriptions of mental properties.⁵³ Against that putatively Wittgensteinian view, it is now generally accepted that if we draw the distinction between the as-subject and as-object uses of ‘I’ by reference to the features Wittgenstein identifies – whether or not the case involves ‘the recognition of a particular person’, and whether or not the judgement is immune to error through misidentification – the as-subject/as-object distinction cuts across the distinction between self-ascriptions of physical properties and self-ascriptions of mental properties.⁵⁴ Thus, there are self-ascriptions of physical properties in which ‘I’ is used as subject: for instance, the judgement ‘My legs are crossed’, made on the basis of proprioceptively feeling my legs to be crossed. When I make the judgement on that basis, there is no process of recognizing the person whose legs are crossed as me, on the basis of my physical characteristics. So my judgement is immune to error through misidentification; I could not be in the position of knowing that *someone* has his legs crossed but wrongly thinking that it is

⁵² BLBK:66-7.

⁵³ For that view, see e.g. Evans 1982, 218-9; Sluga 1996, 335; Bakhurst 2001, 232.

⁵⁴ For examples, see Shoemaker 1968, 557; Evans 1982, 218-20.

me whose legs are crossed.⁵⁵ Similarly, there are self-ascriptions of mental properties in which ‘I’ is used as object: for instance, the judgement ‘I am depressed’ made on the basis of seeing myself in a mirror (imagine a case in which it is only when I see myself in the mirror that I judge that I am depressed, rather than merely unhappy). In that case, my judgement is not immune to error through misidentification; I could be right that the person I see in the mirror is depressed, but wrong that that person is me.

In the literature, it has been taken for granted that in both cases – the use of ‘I’ as subject as well as the use of ‘I’ as object – we use the word ‘I’ to ascribe properties to a person: a human being. When I say, or think, ‘My arm is broken’, I am ascribing the property of having a broken arm to a human being: TWC. Of course, I need not be thinking of myself *as TWC*; I may simply be thinking of myself *as myself*. Nonetheless, what I am thinking about, and what my use of ‘I’ refers to, is a particular human being, TWC. By the same token, when I say or judge ‘I have toothache’ or ‘I think it will rain’, I am ascribing the property of having toothache or thinking it will rain to a human person. On this understanding, there is no difference between the as-subject and as-object uses of ‘I’ with respect to *what* we pick out with ‘I’. The difference is a matter of the *basis (if any) on which* we pick it out.

Understood in this way, the distinction Wittgenstein is drawing when he contrasts the use of ‘I’ as subject and its use as object is quite different from the distinction he draws three pages earlier in the *Blue Book*, and in the 1933 lectures, between the use of ‘I’ for the physical subject and its use for the geometrical subject. For if ‘I’, when used as subject, is used to talk about a human being, as on the standard understanding, then what it picks out is not the geometrical subject: it is the physical subject. But it is worth considering whether this standard interpretation is correct. Should we, rather, understand the as-subject/as-object distinction as being essentially the same as the geometrical subject/physical subject distinction? Such an interpretation would cast interesting light on a number of features of Wittgenstein’s discussion; it would, for instance, provide an explanation of the fact that his choice of examples of as-subject uses of ‘I’ all involve self-ascriptions of

⁵⁵ I have argued elsewhere that Wittgenstein himself recognizes in the *Blue Book* that self-ascriptions of physical properties are often made in a distinctively first-person way, on the basis of ‘tactile and kinaesthetic experiences’ (see BLBK 21-2), and thus that he does in fact acknowledge the existence of a category of physical self-ascriptions in which ‘I’ is used as subject. (See Child 2011, 378.) I will not pursue that point here.

mental properties. I shall not explore that interpretative question here. But I do think it deserves attention.

In the remainder of the paper, I shall assess two claims that have been made by a number of writers who are generally sympathetic to Wittgenstein’s work: first, that the *Blue Book* distinction between the uses of ‘I’ as subject and as object is erroneous; second, that the distinction is absent from Wittgenstein’s later work.

P. M. S. Hacker criticizes the *Blue Book* distinction on the grounds that, *pace* Wittgenstein, the as-object uses of ‘I’ that he cites do not involve the recognition of a person, and that they are no more vulnerable to the possibility of errors of misidentification than the as-subject uses. Hacker writes:

I may be mistaken about whether my arm or your arm is broken or, in exceptional circumstances, whether *this* arm is mine or yours. But in such cases, when I mistakenly say ‘I have broken my arm’, for example, I do not *misidentify* myself or *mistake* myself for you; rather, I mistake my arm for yours, mistakenly attribute to myself something correctly attributable to you.⁵⁶

A paper by Hacker and Hans-Johann Glock makes similar points and adds that ‘the suggestion that referential error is possible in the “objective” case is questionable’.⁵⁷ Maximilian De Gaynesford argues that there is no more possibility of misidentifying myself when I use ‘I’ as object than when I use ‘I’ as subject.⁵⁸ These and other critics make two points about the use of ‘I’ in judgements like ‘I have a broken arm’ or ‘I have a bump on my forehead’. First, such uses of ‘I’ are immune to reference failure; if I make a judgement of this form, my use of ‘I’ cannot fail to refer to something. Second, they are immune to mistaken reference; if I make such a judgement, my use of ‘I’ cannot refer to something other than myself. Those points are perfectly correct. But they are not effective criticisms of Wittgenstein. For the kinds of error to which the critics insist that as-object uses of ‘I’ are immune are not the kind of error that Wittgenstein is talking about. When he says that ‘the possibility of an error has been provided for’ in the judgement, ‘I have a bump on my forehead’, he is not saying that my use of ‘I’ may fail to refer, or that it may refer to someone other than me. His point, rather, is that it is possible for me to make an error about *who it is* who has a bump on his forehead: it is possible for me to know of someone that he has a bump

⁵⁶ Hacker 1990, 485.

⁵⁷ Glock and Hacker 1996, 100.

⁵⁸ De Gaynesford 2017, 486.

on his forehead, but to be mistaken in taking that person to be myself. And Wittgenstein is absolutely right: both that judgements in which ‘I’ is used as object are vulnerable to errors of that kind; and that judgements in which ‘I’ is used as subject are not. Similarly, Hacker and others complain that Wittgenstein is wrong to say that, if I make this kind of error, I am mistaking myself for someone else. But what Wittgenstein says about such cases is not that I mistake myself for someone else; it is that I mistake someone else for me. And, as before, that seems exactly right. The objections these critics have raised are based on a misconstrual of the kind of error Wittgenstein is describing.

But what of the critics’ further claim: that the idea that ‘there are two different cases in the use of the word “I” – the use of ‘I’ as subject and its use as object – is dropped by Wittgenstein after the *Blue Book* and is absent from his later work? It is true that we do not find the expressions ‘use of “I” as subject’ and ‘use of “I” as object’ in Wittgenstein’s post-*Blue-Book* writings. But in *Philosophical Investigations* we do still find Wittgenstein insisting that, in self-ascriptions that are made on a distinctively first-personal basis, there is no recognition of a person involved: no process of identifying myself on the basis of my characteristics. And that is the defining characteristic of the use of ‘I’ as subject. Similarly, we still find him insisting that it is possible to make judgements about myself in a way that is not distinctively first-personal, and that such judgements do involve the recognition of a particular person. And that is the defining characteristic of the use of ‘I’ as object. We can illustrate these points in turn.

First, the idea of the use of ‘I’ as subject in Wittgenstein’s later work. In *Philosophical Investigations* §404 he writes:

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’s the one who is sitting over there, or the one who is standing in that corner, the tall one over there with the fair hair, and so on. – What am I getting at? At the fact that there is a great variety of criteria for the ‘*identity*’ of a person.

Now, which of them leads me to say that *I* am in pain? None.⁵⁹ That exactly mirrors what he says in the *Blue Book* about the as-subject use of ‘I’: that, ‘in the cases in which “I” is used as subject, we don’t use it because we recognize

⁵⁹ PI §404.

a particular person by his bodily characteristics’.⁶⁰ The point he is making in *Philosophical Investigations* about the use of ‘I’ in ‘I am in pain’ is precisely the same as the point he makes in the *Blue Book* when he offers ‘I have toothache’ as an example of the use of ‘I’ as subject.

The idea that there is a different use of ‘I’ or ‘my’, which does involve the recognition of a particular person, can also be found in *Philosophical Investigations*. In *Philosophical Investigations* §411, Wittgenstein discusses the questions ‘Is this foot *my* foot?’ and ‘Is this body *my* body?’. He describes various circumstances in which those questions may be asked and different ways in which they could be answered. The reader is left to work through the details of the different cases for herself. And when we think them through, we find a clear distinction between cases in which ‘I’ or ‘my’ is used as object and cases in which it is used as subject. On the one hand, he describes the case ‘in which my foot is anaesthetized or paralysed’ and the case where I am ‘pointing to a reflection in a mirror’. When I judge ‘This foot is *my* foot’ or ‘This body is *my* body’ in those circumstances, I have to recognize the foot or the body as my own on the basis of its physical characteristics. Accordingly, the uses of ‘my’ in those judgements are uses of ‘my’ as object. And the judgements are correspondingly vulnerable to error through misidentification: I might be right that this foot is someone’s foot, but wrong that it is my foot; and I might be right that this body is someone’s body, but wrong that it is my body. On the other hand, Wittgenstein describes circumstances in which the judgement ‘That’s my foot’ would be reached in a different way, ‘by finding out whether I can feel pain in this foot’, and similarly for the judgement ‘That’s my body’. If I judge ‘That’s my foot’ in that way, on the basis of feeling pain when that foot is pricked with a pin, then my use of ‘my’ does not involve recognizing myself on the basis of my bodily characteristics: it is a use of ‘my’ as subject.

It seems clear, then, that the distinction between the use of ‘I’ or ‘my’ as subject and the use as object, drawn in the same way as in the *Blue Book*, survives in *Philosophical Investigations*. Though Wittgenstein does not use those labels after the *Blue Book*, the distinction itself remains the same. At least, the distinction is the same if we understand the use of ‘I’ as subject in the *Blue Book* as it has standardly been understood: as a use of ‘I’ for talking about a human person. One way of

⁶⁰ BLBK: 69.

challenging my contention that the as-subject/as-object distinction continues from the *Blue Book* into *Philosophical Investigations*, then, would be to challenge that standard understanding of the *Blue Book* distinction. As I have said, that challenge deserves consideration. But that is a project for another occasion.⁶¹

⁶¹ Earlier versions of some of this material were presented at the 2015 Summer Research Seminar at the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, University of Iowa, and at a conference on Wittgenstein and the First Person at Ertegun House, Oxford, in May 2017. I am grateful to the organizers and sponsors of those events, and to the participants on both occasions.