

The Philosophical ‘Eye’

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Introduction

Consider the strangeness of the word ‘I’. It is the most ordinary word in any language, deployed billions of times a day without ceremony or thought. And yet, as Wittgenstein reminded us, ‘the word “I” does not mean the same as this body’ (1961, §4.411). When I say ‘I’, I am not pointing to my body as one object among others in the world. Something more peculiar is afoot. The word hovers in a peculiar grammatical space, referring to no thing at all, and yet grounding the entire edifice of what we take to be a life, a history, a self that persists through time. What kind of word behaves like that?

This essay is an attempt to look carefully at that word, and at what it discloses — and what it conceals. It is also a meditation on the act of looking itself. There is, I want to suggest, a kinship between ‘I’, ‘Aye’, and ‘Eye’ that is more than a pun, though it begins as one. The Northern ‘Aye’ (that warm, direct affirmation of assent) carries within it something of the pointing finger and the opening eye. To say ‘Aye’ is to say: I am here, I witness this, I confirm it. It is a first-person utterance in the most embodied sense. And the Eye (the phenomenological Eye, the window through which the world appears) is the organ of that witnessing.

So: I, Aye, Eye. Three syllables, one root gesture. **I point to myself; I assent to my own existence; I look out at the world and find it looking back at me.**

This, in miniature, is the problem of the self. We assume, most of the time, that there is an ‘I’ who inhabits this body, thinks these thoughts, and moves through this life. But philosophy has always known that this assumption is under pressure. **The further we look, the harder it becomes to say exactly what is doing the looking.**

Development

The puzzle begins, for modern philosophy, with David Hume. When Hume turned his attention inward, expecting to find the self, he found instead a **bundle of perceptions**, sensations, thoughts, and feelings, all in constant flux. *‘For my part,’* he wrote, *‘when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I stumble on ever instance of some perception or other’* (1739, Book I, Part IV, Section VI). There is no persistent ‘I’ to be found inside the stream of experience. What we call a person is more like a flame than a substance: it persists, it has a shape and a history, but there is no wick at its centre, no unchanging thing that burns. Hume’s bundle theory leaves us with a genuine problem. If there is no persistent self, then what becomes of responsibility, of memory, of **the unity of a life**?

John Locke offered a different answer. For Locke, personal identity (the thing that makes me the same person I was yesterday) is constituted by **continuity of memory** (Locke, 1694, Chapter XXVII). What I am, metaphysically speaking, is less important than what I can remember having been. If I can genuinely recall doing something, then I am the same person who did it. This has the virtue of making practical sense of moral responsibility. But it has the vice of making personal identity hostage to the vagaries of memory. A person who loses all memory of their past has, on Locke’s account, ceased to

exist as that person, even if their body continues. And this seems, intuitively, wrong. Those who suffer the extremes of dementia, hence, become (from Locke's point of view) 'unpersoned'.

William James took a different approach again. For James, the self is not a thing at all but a process — a *'stream of thought'* that is perpetually becoming (James, 1890, Chapter IX). The 'I' that watches is itself part of the stream, not something apart from it. James distinguished between the 'I', the knower or pure ego, and the 'Me', the empirical self that is known and thought about. But even this distinction dissolves under pressure, because the knower and the known are in constant interaction. We are, on James's account, **both subject and object** simultaneously, a creature who is always in the middle of something rather than at either end of it.

This is a deeply phenomenological way of thinking, and it finds its most rigorous expression in the work of Edmund Husserl. Husserl's phenomenological reduction (the suspension of judgement about the existence of the external world) reveals the transcendental ego as the pure locus of conscious experience (Husserl, 1900, §84). The world, for Husserl, is always constituted for a consciousness; there is **no** *'view from nowhere'*. But this raises a puzzle. If the transcendental ego is the condition of possibility for experience, then it cannot itself be an object of experience. I cannot step outside my own constituting activity and observe it as one item among others.** The 'I' is, in a precise sense, invisible to itself.**

Merleau-Ponty took this embodied turn further still. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not an object among objects in the world; it is the **vehicle of our being-in-the-world**, the subject through which the world reveals itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, Part One). When I reach for a cup of tea, my body is not a mechanical apparatus that my 'I' directs from above. It is me, already in the world, already oriented toward the cup before any act of conscious will. The body-subject is the forgotten dimension of the problem of personal identity. We spend so much time worrying about whether there is a soul or a mind or a self that we overlook the flesh and bone that is always already there, doing the work.

Wittgenstein, characteristically, refused the whole framing. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he argued that the grammar of 'I' is not a reference to a private object but a device embedded in public language-games (Wittgenstein, 1953, §398). When I say *'I have toothache'*, the 'I' functions differently from when I say *'I have a red nose'*. In the first case, I am not identifying a person; I am expressing a state. In the second, I may be identifying myself among other persons. **The grammar of 'I' is varied and rule-governed, not a reference to some inner substance.** The temptation to think of the self as a private, inner entity arises, Wittgenstein suggested, from grammatical optical illusions — from confusing the use of a word with a picture that floats before us when we use it.

This connects to Wittgenstein's earlier work in the *Tractatus*, where he declared that *'the subject does not belong to the world; rather, it is a limit of the world'* (1961, §5.632). The 'I' is not an object in the world but the precondition for the world's being given at all. This is a deeply anti-Cartesian claim. There is no inner theatre, no isolated *res cogitans* looking out at a mechanical world. **The world-and-its-subject are constituted together.**

And yet the feeling of an inner self persists. This is not an illusion in any simple sense, nor is it a fact to be celebrated. It is a feature of consciousness that demands explanation. Thomas Nagel's famous question — 'What is it like to be a bat?' — dramatises the problem (Nagel, 1974). There is something that it is like to be me, something that is not accessible to any objective description. The subjective character of experience (its 'what-it-is-likeness') cannot be captured in third-person terms. Every attempt to explain consciousness from the outside leaves something out. And what it leaves out is precisely the 'I'.

David Chalmers has called this the **'hard problem'** of consciousness (Chalmers, 1995). Why does there need to be anything it is like to be a particular arrangement of matter? Why should physical processes give rise to subjective experience at all? These questions resist the standard tools of

neuroscience, which can tell us a great deal about what the brain does but cannot, in principle, tell us **why** there is an inner life.

Hence Thomas Metzinger suggests that the self is a **'self-model'** constructed by the brain, a model that represents itself as transparent. As not being a model at all (Metzinger, 2003). We are, on this account, phenomenally transparent to ourselves, which is to say we take our model of ourselves for the thing itself. Alva Noë offers a related idea: the self is not something we have but **something we do**, a pattern of organisation and engagement that the brain and body enact together (Noë, 2006).

There is no self sitting inside the skull; there is only a self in the world, in action, in relationship.

The social dimension of this problem brings us to the looking-glass self, a concept articulated with great force by George Herbert Mead and later by Charles Cooley, and developed philosophically by Sartre and de Beauvoir. When I look at myself, I am always already looking through the eyes of others. I internalise their gaze, their expectations, and their judgements, and these become constitutive of who I am. I am the subject of my own social relationships, moderated by the hegemonic nature of history and culture. When I see myself, I am seeing myself 'as' someone. Never in the abstract.

Sartre's concept of *le regard* (the look) captures the way in which the Other's gaze can arrest me, can make me an object for another's consciousness (Sartre, 1943, Part One). When I catch someone looking at me, I am suddenly aware of myself as something visible, as a surface that can be seen. The 'I' that does the seeing is split, in that moment, by the 'me' that is seen.

De Beauvoir extended this insight in a specific and transformative direction. She argued that woman has historically been constituted as **the Other**. As the negation of the masculine norm, the inert body upon which masculine subjectivity inscribes itself (de Beauvoir, 1949, Part One). The 'I' that claims universality has always, in fact, been a partial 'I', a masculine 'I' that universalised itself by treating everything else as particular, as other. Sometimes, in the power struggles of history, as the contemptible other. The question of who counts as a subject (who is permitted to say 'I' and mean it) is thus not a neutral philosophical question but a political one. There is a genealogy of the first person, and it has exclusions built into its foundations.

Jacques Derrida would trace this back to the structures of language itself. The self is not present to itself; it is always already deferred, always constituted through a chain of differences. *Différance* (the word Derrida coined to capture both the deferral and the differentiation that characterise meaning) applies as much to the self as to any other sign (Derrida, 1968). When I say 'I', I deploy a signifier that refers to nothing present, nothing given, nothing certain. I am, in a sense, always writing a cheque against an account that has no funds. And yet the cheque circulates; it works; it purchases. The 'I' functions in language even though the metaphysics of the 'I' are deeply obscure. This is not a defect of language but perhaps its most remarkable achievement.

The unconscious, as Freud described it, complicates this picture further still. The Freudian subject is not even the master of its own house. The unconscious drives, the repressed material, the mechanisms of transference — all of these show that the 'I' is a battleground, not a fortress. Freud offered us a self that is divided against itself from the start, riven by forces it cannot fully know or govern (Freud, 1923). The ego is not the centre of a unified psyche; it is itself a construction, a compromise formation between the demands of reality, the claims of the superego, and the brute drives of the id. There is no pure 'I' beneath the fray. There is only the fray. The Revolution-of-the-Self is lifelong.

Marx would have said that all of this (the philosophical speculation about the isolated individual) gets things backwards. The 'I' does not precede society; the 'I' is constituted by it. *'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence,'* Marx wrote, *'but their social existence that determines their consciousness'* (Marx, 1859, Preface). The bourgeois ideal of the autonomous, self-owning individual is itself a historical product, an ideological reflection of capitalist relations of

production. We are, all of us, social beings through and through, and the illusion of the atomised self is part of what keeps us from understanding this. Judith Butler would take up this insight and radicalise it: the 'I' is not only socially constituted but discursively performed, iterated through repeated acts of speech and behaviour that produce the very subject they appear to merely describe (Butler, 1990, Chapter 3).

There is no pre-existing self that then chooses to perform; the performance is the self. This is the paradox of performativity, and it applies as much to the philosopher writing an essay about the self as to anyone else.

And what of Parfit? Parfit's work on personal identity offers a quietly devastating reductionist account (Parfit, 1971; 1984). If psychological continuity (the overlapping chain of beliefs, desires, memories, and intentions) is what matters about personal identity, and if psychological continuity can be preserved in ways that do not require a single metaphysical self, then perhaps personal identity is not what we think it is. Perhaps what we care about when we care about survival is not the persistence of some entity called 'the self' but the continuation of certain psychological relations. And these can be preserved in fission cases, in teleportation paradoxes, and in the gradual replacement of neural tissue. Parfit does not deny that we exist; he simply refuses to accord that existence the metaphysical weight we normally assign to it. **We are, he suggests, more like societies than like souls.**

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? I began by noting the strangeness of the word 'I' — its grammatical oddness, its referential emptiness, its remarkable work in the world. The thinkers I have drawn on here do not agree with one another. Hume and Parfit are reductionists; Husserl and Sartre insist on the irreducible centrality of subjectivity; Wittgenstein dissolves the problem grammatically; Butler and Marx dissolve it politically; Freud dissolves it psychologically. And yet there is a family resemblance among these dissolutions.

In each case, something that we took to be a substantial entity (the soul, the Cartesian ego, the autonomous individual) turns out to be a product of something else: a bundle of perceptions, a language-game, a social relationship, a discursive practice, or a neural model.

What remains, after all these reductions, is not nothing. What remains is the world, and experience, and the peculiar fact that there is something it is like to be someone. The hard problem of consciousness has not been dissolved by any of these moves; it remains, stubborn and resistant, at the centre of the picture. There is genuine experience, genuine suffering, genuine joy — and these are not illusions, even if the metaphysical entity we call 'the self' is. This is a philosophically important distinction. Parfit is right that the self may be less substantial than we think; he is wrong if he thinks that this makes experience less real. **The stream of thought is real, even if the observer standing in it is not.**

The continuity of consciousness over time remains, in my view, the deepest puzzle here. I am not the same person I was ten years ago. My body has changed, my beliefs have shifted, and my character has evolved. And yet I feel (directly, immediately, without argument) that I am the same person. Not merely that I am continuous with that earlier person, but that I **am** that person. Where does this feeling come from? The neuroscientist will tell me about autobiographical memory, about the default mode network, or about the brain's capacity for temporal integration. This is valuable information. But it does not explain the phenomenological givenness of continuity. The way in which the present moment feels like mine rather than merely belonging to a body that I happen to inhabit. There is something that it is like to be me, and that something has a temporal thickness that no purely third-person account can capture.

Coda

I began with a pun (I, Aye, Eye) and I want to end with it too. When I say 'Aye', I am not merely assenting to a proposition. I am affirming presence. I am saying: **I am here, I am looking, I am witnessing.** The Northern 'Aye' is a small philosophical act. It is the Eye saying yes to itself, the I pronouncing its own existence in the most direct way available. And the Eye (the organ, the metaphor, the phenomenological window) is what makes all of this possible. Without the capacity to perceive, to be perceived, to examine the world and find it examining me, there would be no 'I' at all.

Wittgenstein ended the *Tractatus* with a sentence that has reverberated through philosophy ever since: '*Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*' (1961, §7). But silence, too, is a form of saying. The eye that closes in sleep is still an eye. The 'I' that cannot speak is still an 'I'. **We are not, I think, illusions.**

We are not substances. We are something stranger and more wonderful: patterns that hold, streams that flow, acts that persist in the very act of changing. The philosophical eye looks at itself looking and finds (not a thing, not a soul, not a self-model) but a question that no answer can fully answer. Perhaps that is precisely as it should be? The eye is not made to see itself completely. That is its one limit and its great dignity.

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