

Epistemology of Mind 5/6: Immunity to Error through Misidentification

Sometimes you make a mistake as a result of misidentifying a relevant individual.

For instance, someone leaves a hat behind after a party. You think it was Gorav you saw wearing the hat, but actually it wasn't Gorav it was Aidan. So your belief that Gorav was wearing a hat was mistaken, on the basis of misidentifying the hat-wearer.

Our question today is this: are mental self-ascriptions vulnerable to that kind of misidentification? If not, *why not*? What's so special about them?

Some prima facie reason for thinking that they are not susceptible to this kind of error:

It is coherent to say "someone is wearing a hat, but is it Gorav who is wearing the hat?" Can one coherently ask "Someone is in pain... but is it *I* who am in pain?" or "Someone is happy, but is it *I* who is happy?"

"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 mind. 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... And now this way of stating our idea suggests itself: that it is impossible that in making the statement 'I have a toothache' I should have mistaken another person for myself, as it is to moan with pain by mistake, having mistaken someone else for me. To say 'I have a pain is no more a statement *about* a particular person than moaning is." Wittgenstein. *Blue and brown books* 66-7

1. What's the relevant claim?

Some first-person attributions of mental states are immune to error through misidentification

i.e. it is impossible to misattribute some mental states to oneself due to misidentifying the subject of the mental state

Almost immediately we are into caveats...

Only some methods of attribution...

- We're only interested in cases when the knowledge is gained through certain methods, i.e. direct introspection, not through hearing your parents talking about how you're getting on at university.

Only some states...

- **Occurrent thoughts** and **bodily sensations** seem like paradigm cases of the phenomenon in question

1.1 What about Episodic Memory?

Can episodic memory be subject to error through misidentification? Can you have a false memory as a result of misidentifying the subject of the memory?

For instance: your brother tells you about your early childhood trips to the seaside and the time he was stung by a jellyfish. You don't remember the trip yourself, but over time you come to form false memories, and in particular you form a false memory of being stung by a jellyfish...

- Shoemaker argues that we can have cases of misidentification of this form that are *quasi memories* at least, even if not actual memories.

- So it's just contingent that episodic memory doesn't fall prey to error through misidentification
- Evans objects that these cases of quasi memory tell us nothing about memory itself...
 - For this case to involve misidentification, we have to think of the memory in question as providing identity-neutral grounds.
 - But actual cases of memory never do that
 - To the extent that these cases rely on identity neutral mental content, they don't really involve genuine episodic memory at all.
 - To the extent these cases do involve episodic memory, e.g. your episodic memory of your brother telling you stuff, that's not identity neutral. It just allows you to *misattribute* a property.

"Memory is not a way of possessing knowledge about an object of a kind which leaves open the question of the identity of that object. If a subject has, in virtue of the operations of his memory, knowledge of the past states of a subject, then that subject is himself." (Varieties of Reference p.245)

Coliva of Evans view: "I am not misidentifying anybody, but merely attributing to myself a *property* that I do not have" (p.407)

She argues that there are two powerful intuitions it's hard to reconcile here—

- a) that memory impressions inevitably have first person content
- b) that it's really an error of identification not predication here.

1.2 Bodily Awareness

Is it just mental predicates or does it include bodily awareness?

- People have thought that the mental was special in this regard: see the Wittgenstein case above.

Evans disagrees: it's not just our knowledge of our satisfaction of mental properties which gives rise to judgements exhibiting immunity to error through misidentification.

- Thinking otherwise gives rise to unfortunate impression that in thinking of oneself self-consciously, one is paradigmatically thinking about oneself as the bearer of mental properties, as nothing but a mind

"None of the following utterances appears to make sense when the first component expresses knowledge gained in the appropriate way: 'Someone's legs are crossed, but is it my legs that are crossed?'; 'Someone is hot and sticky, but is it I who am hot and sticky?... There just does not appear to be a gap between the subjects having information...in the appropriate way, that the property of being *F* is instantiated, and his having information... that *he* is *F*.'" (Evans p.198)

Broader claim: Immunity to error through misidentification is a straightforward consequence of **demonstrative identification**: it will exist whenever a subject's idea of an object depends on his ways of gaining knowledge about it.

2. What's the significance of the claim?

- What are the implications of this for the self?
 - Are selves identical to living human beings?
 - Is the self an object? If so, it's pretty odd that we can't misidentify it in this way

Why does this happen? Two broad schools of answer.

1. *This is primarily a **linguistic** phenomenon*, rooted in the way in which *I* hooks on to its referent (or doesn't...)

IEM arises because these thoughts don't involve identification in the first place. (Shoemaker, Anscombe)

Shoemaker (1968) argues that there is no identification involved in making first person claims on the basis of introspection. If there were, we'd face a regress.

"Identifying something as oneself would have to involve either (a) finding something to be true of it that one independently knows to be true of oneself, i.e., something that identifies it as oneself, or (b) finding that it stands to oneself in some relationship (e.g. *being in the same place as*) in which only oneself could stand to one. In either case it would involve possessing self-knowledge – the knowledge that one has a certain identifying feature, or the knowledge that one stands in a certain relationship to the presented object – which could not itself be grounded on the identification in question.... The supposition that *every* item of self-knowledge rests on an identification leads to a vicious infinite regress." (1968 p.562)

- Establishing an identity of one thing, *p* with another, *q* requires a criterion or marker of identity, which will be shared by both items
- To identify a criterion of identity for oneself, one would first have to know something about oneself.
- To know something about oneself, one would have to identify oneself, (in order to then make the relevant predication).
- But that's circular, since identification presupposes some kind of knowledge of the item in question.

More generally: identification necessarily goes together with the possibility of misidentification. The latter possibility does not arise in these cases, so we don't really have any identification in these self-ascriptions.

Wittgenstein suggests that 'I' doesn't really refer, it's more like 'it's' when reporting the weather.

2. *This is primarily an **epistemic** phenomenon*, rooted in the nature of how we know our own minds:

Coliva (2002) argues that IEM arises because the kind of identification involved in these states is always and necessarily correct.

Why?

"When the subject is self-ascribing pain on the basis of being introspectively aware of that pain, she is not making such a self-ascription on the basis of the observation of herself "as an object", whose behaviour is taken to be a symptom of such a mental state and which is a reason for ascribing that state. Rather, the self-ascription is based on one's being in that very mental state."

- What is it to be introspectively aware of being in pain?
 - o Just to feel pain...
- What is it to be introspectively aware of a belief?
 - o It's to believe that thing.

Hence these states are logically IEM (in any possible world).

- If X were introspectively aware of Y's pain / belief that it is sunny today, then she herself would be feeling pain / believing that it is sunny today

“Since it is a matter of conceptual truth that each mental state one is introspectively aware of is one’s own, then it is so in any logically possible world.”

- N.b. This is different to proprioception because we have an independent non-phenomenal criterion of identify for what has to count as one’s own body. But we have no mental criterion independent of introspection.

What about the conjoined twins who seem able to know one another’s thoughts directly?

- Is this really a form of telepathy rather than introspection?
- In that case, is this grounded in other evidence for the reliability of the method, rather than being an ability to directly know another person’s thoughts?

3. What about Thought Insertion?

One possible symptom of schizophrenia is the report that the subject is experiencing *someone else’s thoughts*.

Mellor 1970 “I look out of the window and I think the garden looks nice and the grass looks cool, but the thoughts of Eamonn Andres come into my mind. There are no other thoughts there, only his... He treats my mind like a screen and flashes his thoughts on to it like you flash a picture.” (quoted by Clara Humston p.585)

“Thought insertion, in particular, is a phenomenon that is difficult to understand. Patients say that thoughts that are not their own are coming into their head. This experience implies that we have some way of recognising our own thoughts. It is as if each thought has a label on it saying ‘mine’. If this labelling process goes wrong, then the thought would be perceived as alien.” (Frith 1992 p.80)

“Thoughts come into my head like ‘Kill God’. It’s just like my mind working, but it isn’t. They come from this chap, Chris. They’re his thoughts.” (Frith, quoted in Campbell)

Campbell suggests that this is a counterexample to IEM

- These people are right about what thoughts they are but wrong about whose thoughts they are.
- So their present-tense introspectively based reports of psychological states cannot involve errors identification.

Coliva: but these cases don’t show that people are making *first person* self-ascriptions that they can be mistaken about. Rather, they are claiming that these are *third-person* thoughts belonging to someone else. i.e. this only shows that you can misidentify your own thoughts *as someone else’s*. It doesn’t show that you can misidentify someone else’s thoughts as your own.

Recommended Reading

- Coliva, Annalisa (2006). Error Through Misidentification: Some Varieties. *Journal of Philosophy* 103 (8):403-425.
- Campbell, John (1999). Immunity to error through misidentification and the meaning of a referring term. *Philosophical Topics* 26 (1/2):89-104.
- Evans, G. 1982. “Self-Identification.” In his *The Varieties of Reference* (edited by J. McDowell). Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Shoemaker, S. 1968. “Self-Reference and Self-Awareness.” *Journal of Philosophy* 65: 555-567.