

What does the word “I” refer to?

Descartes can be charged with the Western philosophical worry about the *real* “I” being stuck with an adjacent but ultimately simply burdensome body “tagging along” for the ride. The real “I” is seated in a higher realm, capable of so much more were it simply not tied to an ever-failing physical body. There are many issues with such a conception, and I find that these are largely contained within the pervasive denigration of the body rather than necessarily the linguistic split between bodily-I and mental-I. The issues found with the body are the real motivation for driving the wedge between mind and body, rather than any necessary *a priori* distinction between the two. Of course, the central issue found with the body has been pain--and secondarily, mortality. It is understandable that pain, a largely negative experience in itself, and mortality, which tugs at the foundations of our perceived self, have been discussed solely in the negative sense of how they detract from the more “genuine” capabilities of the true “I”, distinct from my pained and dying body. This negativity is habitual and unnecessary.

Drew Leder, in “The Threatening Body”, is right to suggest that the attempted removal of “I” from my body has done great consequential damage--“relegated to but one term of a duality... a partial body” remains.¹ Certainly, the de-bodying of self has greater ramifications than the simple claim “I am not my body”, not massively alarming at first glance. The true ramifications are pernicious, however. Let us consider one example, that of human achievement. If we proceed on the basis that “I” am not my body, my rational or spiritual achievements are not my body’s achievements. They exist in a mental realm, disconnected as I am from the world and the “not-Is” (physical or otherwise--more on this later) surrounding me. How, in such a situation, are these achievements, which we know have value, to be considered as having any genuine value or impact at all? It is entirely dissatisfactory to claim that this value can be accounted for only by the mental “I”, which is the only thing we can be sure of existing. Bodily achievements, by contrast, in the dualist framework, must find their appreciation also only in the thinking-I’s perception of their merit: such achievements are not good in themselves, and are not good in the world, but are good because I, the only sure being, appreciate them from my higher vantage point. Immediately, then, in this case alone, we can see that there is a splintering of human existence at the very point of detaching body from self. Leder tells us that under Descartes’ framework the body “comes to play the role of the Other”. In truth, this sense of the body working apart from us makes up a large part of the human experience. However, the fact that the body appears to be “Other” by comparison to the the experiencing, conscious part of the self is not the real issue. Two different parts of the whole can perform different functions, and indeed one part can perceive the other, without us having to linguistically damage the whole.

There are many other aspects to the self, even to the mental aspect of self, than just thought. Such aspects include a generally-sustained personality, consciousness, self-awareness, and memory of self by others. Indeed, others remembering and acknowledging “I” is as important as one’s own self-awareness. An individual’s characteristics are expected to remain stable over a substantial period of time—as other individuals, and as a community, we are uncomfortable with a person who changes personality regularly or in a short space of time. We might worry about their mental state, and such behaviour is typically associated with unwellness—Alzheimer’s, split personality disorders—for good reason. Trust is key to coexistence with others in this world we undoubtedly share. Despite Descartes’ worries, we largely want to avoid the fear-based threat model in which my own body and other bodies are threatening aliens to the floating “I”. The same is true of the physical attributes of the self; how strange we would find it for a person to come into work each day with a different set of facial features. Indeed, it would almost instantly become impossible to consider that person a consistently-same person. We could hardly say we say the person of Thursday was the same

¹ P.126, Leder, “The Threatening Body”, *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago, 1990.

person as Monday if their physical attributes had changed without prior intention, interference such as surgery, and beyond recognition. What a strange parallel, that we expect the same consistency of mental and physical self--perhaps the two are more aligned than we are keen to admit. Descartes forgot to add to the equation the role of the other things around us, which each appear to consider him- or herself "I"--other people. It is understandable that he did not wish to rely on the role of other thinking things--one is already unstable enough in the Cartesian framework. The ideal "I" for Descartes is the formless consciousness unperturbed by body, though presumably still interested in solving the problems of the physical world. In the less-than-ideal bodied state we are stuck in, where we cannot at first glance trust our own experiences, it's easy to see why it might be difficult to trust other thinking bodied things too.

Leder is right to note that our attention is largely drawn to the body when it is malfunctioning--a phenomenon he terms dys-appearance.² When the body is dysfunctional, it appears to us where it had previously lain unnoticed, and of course our noticing is now imbued with a particular frustration, anger, or fear. As a result of these negative associations, the body has--apparently unfairly--been charged with epistemological error, moral error, and mortality. The body, it seems, is naturally drawn to mischief and error, and the mind is charged with keeping the unwieldy thing roughly under control. And yet, this handler-mind still falls prey to bodily trickery or mishap on a regular basis. Descartes focused on the bodily mishaps which he allowed to destroy trust between his mental and physical being, and his attempt to denigrate body has been largely congruent with an attempt to commend the mental self. "I am a thinking thing ... I possess a body with which I am very intimately conjoined."³ In reducing the body to a possession, Descartes is attempting to protect the sovereignty of the mental self which is for him the entire "I". He need not--nothing which is good of the mental self is lost in the self as union of body and mind. We have no guarantee that a body-less existence would be, for example, painless or immortal. All that Descartes achieves in the end is the reduction of a full person to the singular act of rational thought. Although the human person is a rational one, and much of what makes his existence good and meaningful can be found in the rational realm, the word "I" refers to a great deal more than a simple thinking intelligence.

So for the pained or death-fearing philosopher, the body becomes something vaguely alien, uncontrollable, but somehow capable of intruding into the mental self in a way we cannot prevent. And how strange it seems, what little we know about our own bodies! I do not and cannot see the vast majority of my own body--inner organs, back of the head & neck--and, use of tools such as mirrors and ultrasound machines aside--would be unable to without causing myself serious harm or death. But this should not contribute to a sense that this body is alien to me, or that I am alien within it. In a strikingly similar way, we are also all too unfamiliar with our own minds-- philosophers we may or may not tend towards introspection but a) introspection is not the norm of human thought habit, and b) does not necessarily bring us to the point where we ever truly "know" our inner selves to a greater standard than we know our outer bodily selves. What are the boundaries of what "I" could achieve internally? If "I" achieved *x* (*x* being some great rational achievement), what would it take for me to get to that point? Would "I" still exist or would my identity, memory, capabilities, be so different that I could no longer be considered the same self that I am at this current moment in time? The inner life is a great deal murkier and unfamiliar than the bodily, and so knowledge and attention cannot really be considered factors for continuation between "I" and my body without applying the same criteria to the inner self--and little of any use would be left were we to embark on such a project. As we expected our minds and bodies to maintain a similar standard of consistency in time, body and mind are also comparable in our ability to "work with them" with an incomplete knowledge of their bounds and even their base level functions. Philosopher-biographer John Kaag explains that he had never actually managed to locate his

² P.127, Leder, "The Threatening Body", *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago, 1990.

³ Descartes, "Meditation VI", *Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. Cottingham, Reading, 1996.

self in his project toward self-reliance, and finds that Josiah Royce's lecture on Hegel summarises his struggle: "How empty and ghostly is a life lived for a long while in absolute solitude... Let me alone to work out the salvation of my own glorious self, and... I merely show in such a case who I am not. I am no longer friend, brother, companion,... citizen, father, son;... I discover that I *am* nobody".⁴ Descartes' solipsist project fails to account for the foundational lived experience of other people, and further fails to account that the lived experience of "I" is *grounded* in experience of "not-Is" (the entire world around us). Without intention, this is where Descartes brings us. We are thinkers, trapped within the conscious realm attached somehow to a particular body which brings nothing but pain and trickery (and occasional physical pleasure, though this can only distract from the highest ambitions of the true thinking I). If we cannot trust our body's interpretation of the world around it, we can neither trust other people's existing at all or their accuracy in their explications of their lived experience. This is a lonely world indeed. We need not take Royce to the extreme wherein the "I" is defined *only* by union with others, as many 20th century philosophers attempted, to be able to recognise that other "I"s ("not-I"s) are elementary in the living of "I". At the very least, we must contend that "not-Is", often acting as though they too are conscious beings, feature heavily in the development of our identity, memory, and perhaps most importantly in our language, which permits the meaningful thought Descartes recognises as so valuable. Also in the American tradition, Ernst Hocking latched onto his friend Alfred North Whitehead's philosophical linchpin, a carefree "Here we are!".⁵ With the emphasis on the "we", Hocking sees that Whitehead has overcome modernity's solipsism: "on Descartes' round, which is modernity's, we must all... be solipsists in theory."⁶ Hocking and Whitehead took the Cartesian project not as an inquiry into the relationship of mind & body, but a justification of solipsism. As Kaag puts it, for Descartes, we are all destined to be strangers. Instead, Hocking and Whitehead conceived on an "intersubjective Thou-art, inseparable from each subjective I-am, serving to bind their several experiences together in such a way that the loose suggestion of shared experience with an identical object is defined and confirmed." A little fruity perhaps, but Hocking and Whitehead were right to bring the other minds to the forefront. The collapse into solipsism was Descartes' greatest downfall.

Wittgenstein wishes to do justice to the solipsist position. And like Descartes, he begins with pain. "Where," he wants to know, "is the boundary between your pain and my pain? What makes mine more real? Is it?" In other words, what do we mean when we refer to "my pain"?⁷ Descartes understood the role of pain incorrectly. It does not mark the divide between the real self and his body--though it is his conception of the "real" self which would interpret and act on the pain--but in fact marks the divide between "I" and the outer world. Pain permits the rational brain to recognise that the outside world--the "not-I" is damaging "I". In very rare cases, pain may be a result of miscommunication between the nerves & brain, telling the rational interpreter that there is damage being done when in reality there is no damage being done, but the exception proves the rule: the function of pain is to raise the alarm about physical damage--hand in fire; bacterial infection; stone in shoe. This external-internal divide is what we should notice is highlighted when we discuss pain, not the divide between the pained body and the pained mental self. But there must still be some differentiation here. I am unwilling to denote the "pain-experiencing" body rather than the "body-in-pain" or the "pained" body, because a body without a conscious self is incapable of experience. But this is easily solved--the body needs the conscious self to be *fully* "I", where "I" includes consciousness, thought, identity (of self and by others), memory... and far from meaning that the two therefore need dividing, again we should see that this only more tightly binds us up in that uniquely human union of mind & body. Of course they are differentiated from one another--an arm is differentiated from a leg--but the whole is where our emphasis

⁴ P.168, Kaag, "A philosophy of loyalty", *American Philosophy*, FSG, 2017.

⁵ P.158, Kaag, "A philosophy of loyalty", *American Philosophy*, FSG, 2017.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ P.56, Wittgenstein, "The Brown Book", *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations"*, Blackwell, 2008.

should lie. The only positive conception of this relation between body and mind where the division is highlighted is of the body acting as a sort of “moment-of-conception” in space, continuously allowing the mental self to be borne out of it and exist at all. In this way, it acts also as a bodyguard (or rather, mindguard), alerting the mind to physical threats such as stabbing, disease, which have the potential to bring the mental self out of a state of being and into a state of not-being (death). In other words, in this conception the body exists only to facilitate the mental self, and even where we attempt to display this picture of conscious-master over unconscious-slave in a positive light, we are left with too many issues for this to be a wholly satisfactory portrayal of the relationship: The body when left alone seems to have no reason for existence at all; where we accept the body’s role as a security system and carer for the mental self, every other physical existing thing has to be perceived as somewhat threatening, and the body is reduced to a servile state; there is no satisfactory explanation as to why it seems that every other mental self exists, also attached to its own physical carer/security system. And the snowball rolls on.

Wittgenstein continues deeper into the mind, and the possibility of underlying influence on it. What constitutes a person’s internal workings--are any unconscious thoughts possible? What would they mean for the self? “Can we have unconscious thoughts, unconscious feelings?”⁸ He tells us that answering this would tell us where to find our boundaries. He claims that psychoanalysts believed they had found unconscious “thoughts”. But “thoughts” is too strong. Some would have referred to unconscious desires or influences, but not thoughts. Frustrated, he concludes that the only thought can be consciously done--to divide two “types” of thought is senseless. “For if they don’t wish to talk of ‘unconscious thought’ they should not use the phrase ‘conscious thought’ either.”⁹ We need to clear up what this “unconscious” thing refers to. Unconscious desires, tendencies, preferences, reactions and the like, need not be considered active in any sense. Rather, they serve to even further ground us in our bodies--often, these unconscious responses are functions in the interest of safety, wellbeing, or efficiency. Perhaps as a child my conscious mind experienced regularly that the sound of the car arriving in the driveway meant that my mother had arrived home, and that I had probably not completed the chores I had been tasked with before she left, and that therefore I should quickly jump up, run downstairs and slosh water around the kitchen floor to make it look somewhat mopped (and, understandably, get told off anyway). In such a case, it is perfectly reasonable that the adult brain should attempt to shortcut this process to avoid similar conflict in the future. Again, the body does make mistakes, and were it to direct the legs to jump up at the sound of any further cars pulling into driveways for the rest of its life, it would be safe to assume something in the body was malfunctioning. And yet, provided the body reacts within the bounds of acceptable response, we know very well that these ingrained responses are helpful *rational shortcuts* in the direction of the best response in a potentially confrontational, dangerous, or uncomfortable situation. In other words, such occurrences again show us how much the body works *with* the rational mind, not somehow separately-but-in-alignment to it. Frankly, for the body to shortcut rational thought this bond must be tight indeed.

Also worthy of note here is Wittgenstein’s definition of “I” at least in part by the activity we call thinking, though it is less of a central point than for Descartes. At first glance, it appears thought is not necessary for the “I” to have the most basic level of self-recognition--we can just about picture of a conscious being noticing itself without the language-based thought “That is me”--or perhaps more importantly, “*That is not me*”. A bear in the forest becomes accustomed to seeing its reflection in the waters around it. It would not be bizarre to describe an averagely-intelligent bear as having basic self-recognition. And yet, perhaps the

⁸ P.57, Wittgenstein, “The Brown Book”, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigations”*, Blackwell, 2008.

⁹ P.58, Wittgenstein, “The Brown Book”, *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigations”*, Blackwell, 2008.

bear does not recognise itself at all. Rather, this bear has simply seen its reflection so many times that it has unconsciously switched off its instinctive response to seeing the bear in the water--that thing floating in the lake which *looks* like a bear simply appears when the bear goes to drink. After all, the same bear is also accustomed to the smell of itself, so far that it does not recognise its own smell now. When the wind blows its own smell about, the bear does not panic at the scent of a bear in the wind, and the bear does not smell himself and then decide "That's me"--he just does not smell himself. We would not say this bear *knows* his own smell. Indeed, he has tuned it out entirely, and does not know the smell at all. In the same way, he does not know himself. Thought, then, is required for meaningful self-knowledge, though it is not the entirety of "I". A thinking being can reflect that "*I* am this amalgamation of thoughts, feelings and characteristics, and I am different from that amalgamation over there."

So several things are required for a coherent "I": Of course, consciousness is necessary for "I" to have any sense. In extreme cases such as that of a coma patient, "history of" consciousness or "having the right ingredients and potentiality for" consciousness may suffice for us to still consider that person to be a person, but there is no meaningful "I" at the time of coma. Which is where longevity of identity reveals its importance. Imagine an "I" called Paul. Paul flits wildly between identities. Either he genuinely experiences the set of characteristics *a* for one second and then exclusive set of characteristics *b* for the second second, and so on, or other (reliable) individuals seeing similar dramatic change in the personality of Paul, whom we can reasonably expect as a human person to have a rather more stable coherence of both personality and identity. In such a case, we could say that the "I" is broken--there is no meaningful sense of self in this case. We have established also that *thought* is required for the existence of an "I"--it was impossible for our conscious being to notice itself in any meaningful way without the thought "This is me" or "*That* is not me". And in the more finicky questions of how the self exists within the physical, we have established that the body need be incorporated into the "I" for it to be whole. We have seen that we have no justifiable reason to cast the body aside, and, we can realistically settle on the softer, secondary conclusion that the "I" does not exist without the body's sustaining & protecting of it. Where the focus has historically been on the uncomfortable mind seated within the body, we must proceed instead with an understanding of the mental self's reliance on the physical self, whether we characterise them linguistically as separate objects or as a singular existing thing. This is largely tit-for-tat, and I have opted for the "union" of body & mind: two differentiated aspects bound in one being. Without body, mind does not exist, and without perceiving mind, body is devoid of meaning, and in a very real sense, devoid of life. "I" am to be found in the union of the two.

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