

What does the word 'I' refer to?

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INTRODUCTION

The definition of the word 'I' given in the Oxford Concise English Dictionary is:
pron. & n. pron. (obj. me; poss. my, mine pl we) Used by a speaker or writer to refer to himself or herself. n. (the I) Metaphysics the ego; the subject or object of self-consciousness.

Attention when reading this paper should be taken of the above definition. Including the words 'himself', 'herself' or just 'self'. The word 'self' has no gender and its meaning has been defined in the Collins Gem English Dictionary as: **'distinct individuality or identity of a person or thing; one's basic nature'**.

In reading this paper, I believe it would help for particular regard to be given to the definitions above, specifically the meaning of (I) and 'Self'. This will help with clarity and understanding of the question that has been asked.

This unassuming question appears to be of no significance and does not seem to warrant any critique. However with deeper contemplation you find the question to be very thought provoking. As human beings at some point during our evolution from infancy into adulthood, we become conscious of our individual psychological identity (i) and the immaterial self, awareness and consciousness (I). Our perception of identity (i) is transient, meaning as an infant we have little understanding of our individual psychological (experiences, memories and feelings) identity because we have not developed the use of linguistics to think or speak yet, but as we age this evolves. Philippe Rochat's¹ paper on the **five stages of self-awareness** (consciousness) explains what a child sees in the mirror in early infancy. At level 2 when the child is just passing two months old, the child is able to distinguish their environment from their individual self. This identity and understanding of the self is one that I contend evolves with time (age) and interaction with the social environment, which gives the (i) a layered identity and the distinction made between the baby's body and its environments is made by the (I) that occupies the body of the infant at just two months old. To support my hypothesis referring to the (I) being:

- A. Separate from the body
- B. Transient over time
- C. Having a layered identity
- D. Impacted by its social environment

¹ Five levels of self-awareness as they unfold early in life

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I shall be using Western philosophers whose critique of the self gives validation to my hypothesis. It is not my intention to critique the work on the self by these philosophers however; it is my premise to use their metaphysical analysis of the self to substantiate my idea of what both (i) and (I) refers to. This paper will not be drawing on the philosophy of the East in reference to the question at hand, because no information or directive has been given to pursue this line of thought.

In my summary and conclusion I will evaluate the body of my paper to show that the philosophical thesis presented is rational.

A. Separate from the body

Ludwig Josef Johann Wittgenstein was a philosopher of the 20th Century whom lectured in part at Cambridge University². In some of these lectures he spoke about the grammatical use of the word 'I', plus the philosophical confusion that can arise when used. However, this confusion is not the focal concern but the distinction that Wittgenstein makes between that of the self and body. Wittgenstein in his 'blue and brown book lectures' uses the analogies of **(i) have a bump on my forehead** or **(I) have tooth ache**. The latter analogy makes the distinction between the self that feels pain; in this case the toothache that causes pain and the self that is physically visible to the world. This is the difference between the object and subject. Feeling pain or anger demonstrates the separation of the body and the self. It could be argued that this distinction made by Wittgenstein emphasizes the separation of the self and body by the feeling of pain and his grammatical use of the word (I). However, the critique of pain can be both emotional and physical. For example if a person breaks their ankle they will feel physical pain this is distinct from a person who feels the pain of a broken heart, which is emotional pain and physiological. Of course emotional pain is non-physical. In both the pain of the ankle and the broken heart they both come back to the same human being but never the less this is still a separation.

Rene Descartes the renowned French philosopher, is probably best known for his philosophical statement of ***Cogito ergo sum***,³ which when translated into the English language means ***I think, therefore I am***. The word 'I' in Descartes' statement is linked to the cognitive function of thinking and the word 'am' (singular person or exist). In searching for truth Descartes arrived at the above critique after reasoning that whilst in a dream or waking state, thoughts could come to you and they could be true or false. ***It was necessarily the case that I, who was thinking them, had to be something***⁴. Descartes' '*something*' speaks of the cognitive process, which establishes his first principle of Philosophy. The '*I exist*' part of Descartes' statement is fundamental, as this is where the separation takes place between the body and the immaterial self. To clarify this, if the statement is broken down into two aspects A) I think and B) I exist. A is the cognitive process and is part of the body. B is what Descartes equates to the soul, which is totally distinct from the body and is not dependent on the body to exist, and further more this soul is everlasting.

² Wittgenstein, The blue and brown book pages 67-69

³ Found in IV of Discourse on the Method (1637, written in French but with inclusion of Cogito ergo sum) and of part 1 of Principles of Philosophy (1644, in Latin).

⁴ Rene Descartes A Discourse on the method new translation by Ian Maclean pages 28-29

This second (I) which is not dependent on the body and is eternal has a biblical reference namely ***I am that I am***⁵. One could argue that because Descartes was educated at a Jesuit college and whilst in Paris associated with Theologians, these factors could have influenced his reasoning to arrive at his declaration of ***Cogito ergo sum***. Later philosophers such as Gilbert Ryle also critiqued Descartes' statement. In his own reasoning Ryle says the, ***Ghost in the machine***⁶ meaning a body carries the consciousness and is an integral part of the body opposed to the consciousness being independent to the body. Despite this opposing school of thought the (I) is referred to as separate to the body by Descartes.

B. Transient over Time

This Cartesian soul (I) that Descartes speaks of is that which he contends is separate from the body and this essence persists through time having different qualities. If this soul is undying then it must be transient and the body is the vessel for this soul. Therefore when the body perishes the soul goes on. You may ask yourself where does it go, but this is not in contention here. Although this is a philosophy paper, from a scientific point of view when you were taught physics at school you learnt Einstein's famous equations of $E=mc^2$, which at a basic level says energy and mass are interchangeable, or energy is neither created or destroyed it just changes form. This being the case mass and energy are in a continuous state of flux. As an analogy, if mass is viewed as a body and energy as the soul, then this demonstrates the transient nature of the soul. A more fundamental question that arises here is one of individual psychological identity (i) and the self that is viewed in the physical world and is recognized as you by others. Is this the self that is transient? This question leads me to the analogy of the ***Kleenex box***⁷ if a box of tissues was destroyed and flushed down the toilet in a hospital room, and you go home and see an identical box of Kleenex tissues on a shelf, is this the same box that was destroyed in the hospital room? Obviously no, because although both boxes are identical they are in different places. To clarify, the box is representative of the body and the Kleenex tissue signifies individual psychological identity (i). This identity is transitional over age and time. When the body dies does the soul retain the same psychological identity (memories and experiences) as when it was contained within the body? This question is fundamental to identifying to what is referred to as (I) or the (i).

David Hume comments that with self-introspection human beings ***are nothing but a bundle or collection of perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.... They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind.***⁸ In other words human beings are just a set of psychological continuations and there is no core (individual soul). Let us take for example when a person contracts dementia the

⁵ King James bible Exodus 3:14

⁶ Gilbert Ryle The concept of mind 60th anniversary editions chapter 1 page 68-69

⁷ John Perry, A Dialogue on personal Identity and immortality pages 5-9

⁸ David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, part iv, sec vi

function of memory, language, thinking and the ability to interact within their environment are diminished, or in some cases fully damaged and they are no longer able to function in their environment. Does this constitute that the identity (i) or the soul (I) has departed, with this disease of the mind?

Language, memory, and the way a person thinks are the means by which one can interact with the social environment; and could be classified as characteristics of a person's psychological identity. These characteristics are immaterial in that you cannot touch, smell or even taste them because they are mental tools by which we interpret and interact with the physical environment around us.

In the introduction of this paper I spoke of the five stages of self-awareness whereby infants looking into a mirror are able to be aware or conscious of their body and environment at just two months old. At this stage of development they have not established the cognitive abilities of language, memories and thinking, or the skills to fully interact with their environment both physically and socially. In both the circumstances of the dementia individual and the infant, the former has lost their cognitive abilities and cannot interact in their environment, whilst the latter has yet to develop them.

As an analogy, if the brain is likened to a computer hard disc drive and the cognitive abilities of language, memories and thinking are programs to be written on the hard disc drive then in the case of the individual with dementia, their hard drive has become corrupted by a virus (Alzheimer which causes dementia) and the programs are unable to work or function as before. In the case of the infant the programs (cognitive functions) are in the process of being written on the hard disc drive over time by interaction with their environment.

In both instances of the dementia individual and the infant there is one constant factor, which is present at the beginning of one's life and towards the end of life, which is self-awareness or consciousness. This consciousness is part of the transient aspect of one's soul over the duration of a human life and beyond. I use the word soul here to have both religious connotation (Descartes) and also in the philosophical sense to mean the essence of a person, or the immaterial aspect of one's self.

This immaterial awareness or consciousness answers the question of what does the word 'I' refer to, on two levels. First you have the immaterial self (I) or the true self and secondly you have the individual psychological identity (i). John Perry⁹ reasoned that you could be conscious of your body prior to opening your eyes, just after waking up from sleeping. This consciousness or awareness is consistent whether your eyes are opened or closed. Once you have stopped the cognitive programs of thinking, speech and memories, you come into contact with this self that can be described in part as pure awareness, consciousness and stillness, which I contend, is the true self (I) transient and undying after the demise of a person's body. Then the individual psychological identity (i) is also transient over the duration of a person's life but the psychological continuation dies with the body of a person.

⁹ John Perry, A Dialogue on personal Identity and immortality pages 19-20.

C. Having a layered Identity.

Hume's psychological continuation infers that it is a collection of memories and experiences which link over time that gives identity to an individual person over the duration of a life. For example, a child starting school at the age of 4-5 still retains fresh memories and experiences of that day even when they reach the age of say 7 or 8¹⁰. In contrast this same individual when they have reached the age of 55, will have memories and experiences of that eventful day that have become vague. However, the psychological link is still present in the same mind and body. Derek Parfit and John Lock hold similar views. If you disregard Wittgenstein's 'I' or even Descartes' Cartesian soul, David Hume is advocating that these psychological continuations form an individual's identity. This layered identity is one, which evolves over an individual's lifetime, meaning that as a different stage in one's life is reached, old memories and experiences are covered over by new ones. This is what is referred to as the (i) having a layered identity.

However, these links of experiences and memories are psychological impressions that have been imprinted on the mind. The analogy of the computer hard disc drive used earlier demonstrates this principle. Similarly in the case of Julia North¹¹ who died in a car accident, leaving a healthy brain that was transplanted into the body of Mary Frances Beaudine, whose own brain had died leaving a healthy body. The question arises to whom does the individual identity belong? Is it the body of Beaudine, or the brain of North that now resides in the body of Beaudine. If you advocate Hume's Psychological continuation, then the body belongs to Julia North as her experiences and memories reside in her mind, which now sit in the body of Beaudine. Or does the individual identity belong to Beaudine, as she is visible to her husband, family and her community. This is not to say that one cannot see a person's characteristics but you do see the physical person first. This view of bodily identification is one, which is shared by Bernard Williams¹².

If this critique by Hume were to be adopted, then without social and environmental interaction by the psychological identity it would struggle to exist. *Cogito ergo sum*, 'I think therefore I exist' is in direct conflict with this school of thought because thinking is a primary and direct means by which one formulates memories and experiences. Of course the analogy of the computer hard disc drive is an inanimate object compared to an animated human being, which interacts with its social environment. This dilemma is one, which is at an impasse unless you subscribe to the school of thought of Wittgenstein's separation of the 'I', Descartes' 'soul' or those religions and philosophies from the East such as Taoism or Buddhism.

¹⁰ UWTSD. Pdf Psychological continuation and the body page 1 similar example used.

¹¹ John Perry, A Dialogue on personal Identity and immortality page 38

¹² Bernard Williams, the self and the future chapter 4 page 46-63

D. Impacted by its social environment

Previously I have touched on the impact of the social environment on the self, however, in this section I would like to expand this idea further to show how we distinguish and refer to (i). If we ask the question is the identity (i) defined by the social environment that it finds it self in? From the introduction I discussed the five levels of awareness of an infant. The baby's interaction with its environment starts at just two months old. The infant sees a body in the mirror and recognizes that he or she is that body in the mirror. This interaction with its external environment is how the process of delineation beings. The parents of the child will have already given the child a name to which he or she will begin to identify there individual psychological identity with. The process of identification (environmental conditioning) will continue throughout childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. This process of interaction with their social environment will turn into memories and form experiences, which contribute to psychological identity. Philosophers such as Hume imply this is who we are. However, one could argue that this process is social convention meaning that when a group of people come together to form a community an agreed language must be formulated over time to establish communication so that the objects within that community can be given names by which they can be identified. Without this linguistic agreed convention, communication would be very difficult within that society and individual identity would be much harder to establish because there would be no language.

The interaction within a community or society by an individual contributes to the formulation of the individual psychological identity (i). These memories and experiences are collaboration between the individual and the environment, which one could argue that individual psychological identity (i) would not be possible without this collaboration. However, the assumption is that society is separate from the individual.

To clarify, society of two thousand years ago would be a lot different to society of today. Communities would be more rurally based with less towns and large cities. Human interaction would be more with the natural world.

If we are not separate from the natural world then we are no different to the animals, which interact with the natural world for their survival and identity. Humans have the same interaction but just have a higher cognitive intelligence, which we use to formulate that which we call society, civilization and culture. If we interact more with the natural world maybe our identity (i) would be more in keeping with the (I) as reasoned by Descartes.

SUMMARY

At the start of this paper, the question is similar to the philosophical question that some people ask themselves at some point over their lives, that of 'who am I?' I decided to start at the beginning of one's life, that of an infant to illustrate the initial separation of the self from the body. The five stages of self-awareness demonstrated that when an infant becomes conscious of their body and surroundings this is the beginning of psychological identity. I have used the word

consciousness in the philosophical context to mean awareness and consciousness of self and its environment. This consciousness illustrates the separation of the (I) from the body. One of the primary cognitive functions of the mind is to think. This lead to the statement by Descartes, *I think, therefore I am* or *I think, therefore I exist*. The 'exist' part of Descartes' statement is one that he contends is something separate and not dependent on the body. Wittgenstein provides further separation of the self from the body by the distinction of the feeling of pain.

The self (I) is transient over the duration of a lifetime and beyond if the analogy of Einstein's equations of $E=mc^2$ is agreed with, from a philosophical standpoint or Hume's psychological continuation then the (i) is also transient for the durations of a persons life. However, the question of individual identity aroused, which lead to the idea of the individual psychological identity (i), having a layer identity. For example a person of 5 years old is not the same person psychologically or physically at age 55 or older because their body has aged biologically, meaning facial features are older in appearance, movement is slower and the internal organs have begun to deteriorate, whilst their memories and life experiences have evolved. Memories of pre-adolescent have not been totally forgotten, however, they have been layered over with new memories and experiences, which contribute to the individual psychological identity (i).

The impact of the social environment on the self is one, which is inevitable and cannot be avoided. In fact one could contend, that the social environment impact is necessary for psychological identity to develop and without this social interaction identity would struggle to evolve. To an extent human beings are a product of their environment from the home environment to the wider social environment and this collaboration is fundamental for psychological identity.

CONCLUSION

The question of, what does the word 'I' refer to is one that I believe can only be answered by saying that 'I' is multidimensional. Meaning as a consequence, of a person's perspective, individual experiences, cultural and environmental interaction will determine what this word 'I' refers to. I elected to analyze the word 'I' using philosophers whose critique of the self gave rationale to my hypothesis. To demonstrate the complexity of what the word 'I' refers to I selected just four areas of discussion.

A) Separate from the body. Both Descartes and Wittgenstein critique the self as being separate from the body although their reasoning emanate from different standpoints both philosophers agree with my position. Further to this point Philippe Rochat demonstrates this demarcation of the body from consciousness or awareness in his five stages of awareness. There are opposing schools of thought to my standpoint such as presented by Gilbert Ryle, however, his critique is not in keeping with my hypothesis.

B) Transient over time. To substantiate this aspect of my analysis Einstein's $E=mc^2$ was used as a philosophical analogy to demonstrate the transient nature of the self (I) over time. Descartes' eternal Cartesian soul was also utilized to demonstrate my logical stance on both the transitory aspect of the immaterial

aspect of the self and the psychological continuation of the self (i), which also demonstrated the transient nature because of one's psychology evolution with time and age.

C) Having a layered identity. This identity is more in keeping with the individual psychological identity (i), which are experiences and memories that evolve as an individual ages. The question of what is the true self, individual psychological identity (i) or the immaterial self, awareness and consciousness (I), has not been critiqued in this paper. However, this does not detract from my rational position that (i) has a layered identity because of time and the ageing process.

D) Impacted by its social environment. I think it is a logical analysis to say that without the social environmental interaction, it would be extremely difficult for the (i) to exist. This is because it appears to be a natural collaboration between the self and external environment in order for identity, that of experiences and memories, to be established.

The opening question referring to 'I' calls for academic and philosophical analysis, but at the same time I believe personal introspection cannot be avoided. The philosophers I have used to validate my position do just that, because each one of them brings an element of rational truth from their own schools of thought on the subject matter. However, there are always opposite institutes of thought. This then called for my own personal introspection, experiences and memories resulting from my own social conditioning, thereby influencing my thought processes in conceptualizing the word 'I'. For me it is both the immaterial self, awareness and consciousness (I) and also the individual psychological identity (i). This latter individual psychological identity lays over the immaterial self-awareness and consciousness as a result of ageing and life experiences.

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