

Self-Identification and a Puzzle about Mental Ownership

1. The Theme

‘Self-identification’ is often taken to cover both ‘identification-freedom’ (IF) and ‘immunity to error through misidentification’ (IEM). Contemporary *loci classici* include Sydney Shoemaker’s ‘Self-Reference and Self-Awareness’ (1968/2003) and chapter 7 of Gareth Evans’s *The Varieties of Reference* (1982). Issues concerning self-identification are often discussed together with the so-called ‘essential indexical’ (EI), which was made popular by John Perry’s ‘The Problem of the Essential Indexical’ (1979). Recently, Caleb Liang and Timothy Lane (L&L 2009, 2010) invoke certain empirical studies to challenge philosophical claims about self-identification, with an emphasis on IEM in particular. They conclude that IEM is false. I think the case they describe and elaborate on – ‘somatoparaphrenia,’ which will be explained later – does put much pressure on IEM, but rather than abandoning it altogether, I am going to use the case of somatoparaphrenia as a tool to sharpen our understanding of IEM. For starter, let me say something minimal about IF and EI.

In a trivial sense, IF and IEM are different theses; after all, they are different in letters. However, whether their difference is in some other sense significant is not always clear. For example, in one place Shoemaker remarks on IEM, and he says that Evans ‘makes *the same point* by saying that many first-person utterances and beliefs are “identification free”’ (Shoemaker 1996: 196, my italics). In his illuminating essay on IEM, James Pryor quotes two passages from Shoemaker’s 1968 paper in order to introduce the thesis, but the second one seems to be about IF: ‘If I say “I feel pain”...I maybe identifying for someone else the person of whom I am saying that he feels pain...But there is also a sense in which my reference does *not involve an identification*’ (Shoemaker 1968/2003: 9, my italics). At some other occasions, nevertheless, Shoemaker does say something about the relation. For example, ‘identification-based first-person knowledge must be *grounded* in the first-person knowledge that is not identification-based,’ or there would be ‘an infinite regress’ (Shoemaker 1996: 211, my italics). Whether this indicates a change of mind or just a

slip is an important interpretative issue, but here my interest is not the relation between IEM and IF, so I shall turn to my main concern, namely IEM itself.¹

IEM is a thesis about the first-person pronoun, which has two different uses known as ‘I’ as *subject* and as *object* (Shoemaker 1968/2003). The paradigmatic cases of the former include ‘I am in pain’ and ‘I see a canary’: I might be wrong about the content of my visual experience, but ‘it cannot happen that I am mistaken in saying this because I have misidentified as myself the person I know to see the canary’ (Shoemaker 1968/2003: 8). The latter includes ‘I am bleeding,’ which allows errors concerning who is the subject. IEM is supposed to be about ‘I’ used as *subject*.

When Shoemaker first introduced IEM, he regarded it not as an empirical thesis, but as something like a *tautology* (Shoemaker 1968/2003:15). One of L&L’s aims is to show that IEM is actually empirical, and in fact, empirically *false*. They do this by discussing the implications of somatoparaphrenia on IEM. In what follows I will introduce this neural-psychological syndrome briefly, and argue that even if we accept L&L’s interpretation of it, what follows is not the negation of IEM, but a weaker yet still substantial version of the thesis.

2. The Case

L&L situates the discussion into the context of David Rosenthal’s ‘higher-order thought theory of consciousness’ (often known as HOT), but their arguments based on somatoparaphrenia can be detached from that particular context.² Patients of somatoparaphrenia have a sense of alienation from certain part(s) of their bodies; this is caused typically by extensive right-hemisphere lesions, but sometimes also by sub-cortical lesions. The major symptom of this syndrome is a feeling that a contralesional limb belongs to someone else. Another important related symptom is the loss of conscious tactile feeling of the given body part. The case L&L relies on is FB (Bottini et al. 2002). FB reported that she felt no tactile sensation in the left hand, and *the* left

¹ A few words about EI: in ‘Kant, Self-Awareness and Self-Reference,’ Andrew Brook argues that EI is required by IF. ‘If I am aware of myself as myself without inferring this from anything else that I know about myself, my knowledge that it is myself of whom I am aware has to be independent, at least in some respects of knowing anything else about myself’ (Brook 2001: 11). If, as Shoemaker once argued, IEM is grounded in IF, we can probably say that EI is the most fundamental thesis, and then IF, and finally IEM. But again, here I am not concerned with the relations between the three theses, so I will stay neutral about relevant issues.

² A nice review of the relevant findings is Vallar and Ronchi 2009. Since I am not going to question L&L’s understanding of the syndrome, let me just briefly rehearse the case under their characterization. For more detailed descriptions, please check their 2009 paper.

hand belongs to her niece, rather than herself. In a series of experiment, FB was blind-folded, and primed by the examiner's hints about whose hand – herself or her niece's – will be touched. Whenever she was told that her left hand would be touched, she felt nothing when the examiner did touch the left hand. On the contrary, whenever told that her niece's left hand would be touched, FB reported tactile sensations when the examiner did touch that hand. FB is globally rational, as shown by catch trials done by Bottini and his colleagues, so presumably we should take her relevant reports at face value. FB's case seems to be a counterexample of IEM, since she misidentifies the subject concerning 'the' left hand's tactile sensations.

There can be many further questions about FB's case. For example, if the examiner stimulated FB's left hand harder, would there be a difference about FB's sensations and reactions? The trouble, however, is that somatoparaphrenia typically does not last very long, and FB has in fact recovered, so it is impossible to do further research in this case. Therefore, in what follows I am going to accept L&L's version of the FB case, but argue that it in fact helps us understand IEM better.

Somatoparaphrenia presents a puzzle about 'mental ownership' (L&L 2010). The notion of mental ownership is to be contrasted with 'body ownership.' I shall illustrate this distinction with FB's case. When FB insisted that the left hand belongs to her niece, she was confused about *body* ownership. When she reported tactile sensations upon certain priming, she was confused about *mental* ownership. Although both confusions are exemplified in the case of FB, they are conceptually different. And since IEM concerns 'I' as *subject*, what's at issue is *mental* ownership. This distinction presumably corresponds to Evans's one between 'mental self-ascription' and 'bodily self-ascription' (Evans 1982: 220-35), but since what I am going to take issue with is L&L's view, I will follow their terminologies.

The case of FB seems to be outright contradicted to IEM, so a natural way to rescue the latter is to weaken it. Rosenthal appears to do this with the help of the notion of 'awareness.' He insists, probably rightly, that FB 'is *aware of* the sensation as being her own. But she is also aware of that sensation as having a subjective bodily location in a hand that is not part of her own body, but is instead part of her niece's body' (Rosenthal 2010: 3, my italics). But notice that what is at stake is *identification*, as opposed to *awareness*. Rosenthal might be right that FB is aware of the sensation as being her own, but what's crucial is that for some reason she *misidentifies* the

subject in question as her niece. Awareness is itself an important topic, but to talk about it instead of identification seems to be a change of the subject matter.

A similar situation occurs in Pryor's (unintentional) weakening of IEM. At some point, Shoemaker formulates IEM by saying that 'there is no room' to have the thought such as 'Someone is hungry all right, but is it me?' (Shoemaker 1994/1996: 210). Pryor says:

I take Shoemaker's claim that 'there is no room' for the thought 'Someone is hungry all right, but is it me?' to mean that *it could never be reasonable for me to entertain the doubt* that, although I do know by this means that someone is hungry, it is not me who is hungry. (Pryor 1999: 287, italics in original)

Although Pryor is rephrasing Shoemaker's thesis here, it seems to me that he unwittingly weakens the original claim. Recall that IEM is the thesis that in certain cases we are *immune* to certain kind of error. It does not say that in those cases certain errors are *unreasonable*. To see this more clearly, consider FB's case. FB is said to be commit an error through misidentification, and this conflicts with IEM. But according to Pryor's formulation, FB is not even a putative counterexample, for Pryor's IEM says only that the kind of error is never reasonable, and FB is locally unreasonable due to her brain lesion. This is no good, for to recast *immunity* with *unreasonableness* amounts to a change of the subject matter.

Sometimes Shoemaker himself seems to propose a weakened version of IEM. In the passage I just quoted, he actually says that '*if I have my usual access to my hunger, there is no room for the thought "Someone is hungry alright, but is it me?"*' (Shoemaker 1994/1996: 210, my italics). This is not a change of subject, to be sure, but the conditional form threatens to trivialize the thesis. With this qualification, proponents of IEM can reply to L&L by saying that since FB's case does not satisfy the antecedent, it is altogether irrelevant to IEM's truth. This might well be true, but it looks like a cheap victory. I shall say more about this in my concluding section.

Now if all the proposals discussed above are no good for my purpose, what then is my own alternative? I would like to begin by a brief comparison of Wittgenstein and Shoemaker. Their relevant remarks are almost always taken to be the same, but I want to argue that they are significantly different, and Wittgenstein's

formulation is preferable, at least for the purpose of accommodating cases like somatoparaphrenia. Consider the following two statements:

- (1) To ask ‘are you sure it’s you who have pains?’ would be nonsensical.
(Wittgenstein 1958: 67)
- (2) [T]here is no room for the thought ‘Someone is hungry all right, but is it me?’ (Shoemaker 1994/1996: 211)

‘Nonsensical’ in (1) and ‘no room’ in (2) both refer to the ‘immunity’ part of IEM (remember I do not accept Pryor’s reformulation in terms of ‘unreasonableness’). ‘Are you sure it’s you who have pains?’ in (1) and ‘Someone is hungry all right, but is it me?’ in (2) refer to the ‘error through misidentification’ part. Let me start with Wittgenstein. We need to bear in mind that Wittgenstein often puts much weight on the way he introduces the idea, and the question in (1) looks like a query in response to the subject’s spontaneous report of his sensational state, say, ‘it is *me* who is in pain.’ Here Wittgenstein argues that when a subject sincerely reports that he is in pain, it is nonsensical to question whether the subject is wrong about who is the subject. In the case of FB, she did not spontaneously report that she was experiencing a certain sensation; moreover, she reported that the sensation belongs to someone else. This makes no contact with what Wittgenstein has in mind. However, this is not true in Shoemaker’s case. The question ‘Someone is hungry all right, but is it me?’ allows two kinds of case. First, the subject is not hungry, but he suspects he is the subject of that experience. Second, the subject is truly hungry, but he suspects he is not the subject of that experience. FB fits the second case, so proponents of IEM will have a hard time reconciling this second case with the case of FB. How about the first case? Since by hypothesis the subject is not hungry in the first place, FB’s case would be irrelevant. So if we read Shoemaker’s question in the first sense, it would be easier for proponents of IEM to face empirical cases like FB.

Now what is the relation between Wittgenstein’s question and Shoemaker’s question in the first sense? I think they are closely related, and can be accounted for with a single story. For simplicity, I shall replace ‘hunger’ for ‘pain’ in Shoemaker’s question, so that it is closer to Wittgenstein’s case. In the first sense of Shoemaker’s question, the subject is not in pain, but he suspects that he is. Two familiar cases suggest themselves. First, for those who have the so-called ‘dental fear,’ it is likely

that when they are not the subjects of treatment, the sounds of the drill would nevertheless cause them to identify themselves as subjects of pains. It is not that they identify themselves as the subjects of treatment: this is unlikely, and this would be a case about body ownership. What we should say is that the fears are so strong that they really *feel* that they are in pain. The other familiar case concerns the so-called ‘extreme empathy’: when one is too sympathetic with someone else’s feelings, it is likely that he will have similar experiences caused by the empathy. Now these cases can help us understand Wittgenstein’s question. One might want to insist, against Wittgenstein, that when someone sincerely claims that he is in pain, it is still room for saying that he is wrong, that is, he is actually not in pain. But if the present case is like dental fear and extreme empathy, it can be argued that the subject really feels the pain out of fear or empathy. ‘It is *me* who is in pain’ leaves open the possibility that someone else is also in pain, though we do not talk this way in ordinary conversations. What I am arguing is that IEM obtains in the kind of case I elaborated above, since in those cases, the subject *creates* the feelings somehow, and this makes the avowal in question true.

Let me recap a bit with simple terms. Shoemaker’s question admits two ways of identification: the first is to misidentify others’ experiences to oneself, and the second to misidentify one’s experiences to others. As we have seen, the second one is threatened by cases like FB. By contrast, Wittgenstein’s question is closer to the first sense of Shoemaker’s question, as illustrated by cases like dental fear and extreme empathy. What I am arguing is that FB’s case helps us see the subtle difference between Wittgenstein and Shoemaker here: the latter’s formulation contains a part that are too excessive, and we can improve our understanding of IEM by abandoning that part.

3. The Ramifications

I have completed most I want to say about the topic. In this final section, I will briefly address two related themes; one concerns the relation between IEM and the so-called ‘disjunctive conception,’ and the other concerns the relation between IEM and the often-used ‘Neurath’s boat’ metaphor.

I did not use the term ‘disjunctivism,’ for it is often tied to very specific domains, for example perception. By the ‘disjunctive conception’ I mean something on these lines: in some domains, we can distinguish between the ‘good case’ and the

‘bad case,’ to borrow Timothy Williamson’s wordings (2000). For example, when discussing perception, the good case refers to veridical perceptions, and the bad case refers to illusions and hallucinations. What, then, is the relation between IEM and the disjunctive conception?

Recall that when I discussed ways of weakening IEM, I mentioned Shoemaker in passing. I quoted ‘*if I have my usual access to my hunger, there is no room for the thought “Someone is hungry alright, but is it me?”*’ (Shoemaker: 1994/1996: 210, my italics). This looks like saying that IEM holds *in the good case*. If this is indeed what Shoemaker has in mind, then FB and other pathological cases are ruled out at the very beginning, since they are not good cases. Nevertheless, as I said above, this threatens to trivialize the thesis. Notice that the situation is quite different in the case of perception, where disjunctivism’s main opponent (at least under certain construal) is full-blown sense-datum theory, holding that every case is bad case. If disjunctivism about perception wins, it would be a big achievement. By contrast, people like L&L does not argue that every case is bad case: they admit, as a matter of sanity, that in most cases we do not suffer errors through misidentification concerning the first-person pronoun. Therefore, to argue that IEM holds in the good case, even if successfully, is a cheap victory. Since the disjunctive conception is fairly popular today, to ponder about its connection to IEM might be philosophically interesting, but if I am right, the prospect is not very promising.

Now to the Neurath’s boat. Whether there are necessary pieces of truth has been a heated debate since logical positivism and Quine. Although the issue is far from settled, the general working hypothesis is that even if there are necessary truths, they are not a lot. This implies that we need to be extremely careful when we want to say certain knowledge is infallible. Now IEM looks to be a piece of infallible, necessary truth, so it deserves extreme cares. It seems to me that Shoemaker’s ‘two-way’ IEM is too informative to be a necessary truth, and this is confirmed by the fact that FB’s case is probably a counterexample of one way in Shoemaker’s IEM. I have tried to argue that cases like dental fears and extreme empathy provide some support for the other way of IEM, i.e. Wittgenstein’s way. And I have provided some justification for the view, namely that in those cases the act of identification creates the phenomenon itself as the truth maker, hence infallibility. It is true that under the pressure of empiricism and Neurath’s boat, it is difficult to insist on any piece of

necessary truth, but at this occasion I venture to propose one, and I hope my reason is good enough to anchor the boat a bit.

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