

Entry title: **Immunity to Error Through Misidentification**
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Commissioned word length: 2000
[PENULTIMATE DRAFT: please refer to published version for citation purposes.]

Abstract

Some utterances are immune to error through misidentification. There are different ways for an utterance to have this status. The phenomenon has philosophical significance because certain 'I'-utterances are immune to this sort of mistake. It is often claimed that 'I'-utterances express first-person thoughts, and so the fact that some of them are immune to error through misidentification is taken to have implications for theories of first-person thought and the self.

Main text

Suppose I overhear a conversation and so come to believe,

(1) Ernie owns a poodle.

Two simple errors I may make are these. I may be mistaken because Ernie owns a greyhound. If so, I have predicated the wrong thing of Ernie. Or I may be mistaken because it is Bert who owns the poodle. In this case I have misidentified the poodle's owner. The latter is called an error of misidentification. To say that an utterance is immune to error through misidentification (IEM) is to say that this sort of mistake has been ruled out. If, e.g., I see a dog in front of me and so form the belief,

(2) That dog is a highland terrier.

I cannot be wrong about *which* dog my judgement is about (although I can make other sorts of mistakes – perhaps the dog is not a highland terrier, or perhaps I am hallucinating and there is no dog). Whether or not an utterance about something is IEM depends on how the utterer is thinking about that thing, and how she has come to know facts about it. The phenomenon interests philosophers because certain 'I'-utterances are IEM, and since many writers take 'I'-utterances to express first-person thoughts, it seems that this fact can shed light on first-person thinking. Section (a) will explain how someone must think about/come to know about *x* for an utterance about *x* to be IEM, then in section (b), the main positions in the debate about IEM 'I'-utterances will be presented.

(a) IEM

There are different ways for an utterance to be IEM. To get to grips with the phenomenon, we first need to understand what it is for an utterance to be *open* to this kind of error (OEM). In the first example above, if the poodle belongs to Bert, I make an error of misidentification when I judge (1) because I mistake Ernie for the poodle's owner. In other words, I judge that Ernie is numerically identical with the owner of the poodle, and my judgement is false because the person who owns the poodle is Bert. Thus we can see that an error of misidentification consists in mistakenly judging that one thing is numerically identical with another, and it is primarily judgements of numerical identity, e.g.,

(3) The person who wrote *Crime and Punishment* is Dostoevsky.

that are OEM. Some subject-predicate judgements are also OEM. This is because they depend on judgements of numerical identity (Evans 1982: 180). Suppose, e.g., that I see a llama standing in a field wearing a blue blanket and make the following subject-predicate judgement,

(4) My sister's llama is wearing a blue blanket.

(4) depends on two further judgements. One is a perceptual-demonstrative judgement about *that* llama (the one I can see),

(5) That llama is wearing a blue blanket.

The other is a judgement of numerical identity,

(6) That llama is my sister's llama.

If (6) is false, in judging (4) I will misidentify the llama that is wearing a blue blanket. Hence (4) is OEM because it depends on (6).

Since a judgement will be OEM if it either is or depends upon, a judgement of numerical identity, it follows that a judgement will be IEM if it is not of these types. There are many different kinds of judgement that are IEM. However, discussion in the literature tends to focus on IEM subject-predicate judgements. These are perceptual-demonstrative judgements – i.e., judgements that are wholly based on direct awareness of the thing the judgement is about such as,

(5) That llama is wearing a blue blanket.

It is clear that (5) is IEM – I cannot be wrong about *which* llama is wearing a blue blanket (although my judgement can go wrong in other ways, e.g., if the blanket is not blue, if there is no blanket, or even no llama). (5) is IEM because I both identify the object of the judgement (the llama), and come to know that it is wearing a blue blanket on the basis of seeing it in the field. As a result, (5) does not depend upon a judgement of numerical identity, and so the possibility of error through misidentification has been ruled out.

(b) IEM T-utterances

Philosophers are primarily interested in IEM because some 'T-utterances are IEM. It seems, e.g., impossible to utter,

(7) I am in pain.

and be mistaken about *which* person is in pain. It is widely held that 'T-utterances express first-person thoughts. If this is so, then the fact that some are IEM can shed light on the nature of first-person thinking, and the self. Nearly all writers accept that some 'T-utterances are IEM (see, however, Campbel 1999), but the source of this immunity is disputed.

What is perhaps the most influential account of IEM 'T-utterances assimilates them to perceptual-demonstrative judgements. Those 'T-utterances that are IEM appear to express subject-predicate judgements. When, e.g., I utter (7), I seem to be saying that some object (myself) satisfies the predicate 'in pain'. We saw above that a subject-predicate judgement will be IEM if it is wholly based on direct awareness of the thing the

judgement is about. Many writers are thus led to conclude that an utterance such as (7) is IEM because it is wholly based on direct awareness of oneself – I observe myself and observe that I am in pain. These writers thereby treat ‘I’ as a perceptual-demonstrative comparable to terms such as ‘this’ and ‘that’ (note, however, that these terms also have uses that are not perceptual-demonstrative). But ‘I’ does not behave like other perceptual-demonstrative terms. I can use a term such as ‘that’ to refer to lots of different things; sometimes an utterance of ‘that’ will fail to refer to anything – e.g., if I hallucinate a llama before me, my attempts to refer to it using ‘that’ will fail. In contrast, it is traditionally claimed that I can only refer to myself using ‘I’, and ‘I’ cannot fail to refer. Thus the self-awareness that underlies ‘I’-utterances that are IEM cannot be like ordinary forms of observation. First, I use a perceptual-demonstrative term such as ‘that’ to refer to something I currently see. ‘That’ can be used to refer to lots of different things because I can see many entities. If ‘I’ is a perceptual-demonstrative that can only be used to refer to oneself, it follows that its use must be based on awareness one can only have of oneself. Second, perceptual-demonstratives can fail to refer because we can have illusory experiences where we seem to perceive an object, which is not in fact there. Since ‘I’ cannot fail to refer, the awareness that underlies its use must not allow for the possibility of complete hallucination in this way.

Various objections to the perceptual-demonstrative account of IEM ‘I’-utterances have been raised. Anscombe (1981) objects that the only sort of awareness that could fit the bill would be introspection of a non-physical self. This claim creates trouble for the view that IEM ‘I’-utterances should be treated as perceptual-demonstrative judgements because theorists these days take the self to be a physical entity. A further problem is raised by Shoemaker (1968). On the perceptual-demonstrative view, I make an utterance like (9) on the basis of direct awareness of the thing the judgement is about – myself. However, Shoemaker argues that observing a self and noticing that it is in pain only allows me to judge,

(8) That self is in pain.

in the same way that observing a llama and noticing that it is wearing a blue blanket allows me to judge,

(5) That llama is wearing a blue blanket.

But (8) is clearly not equivalent to (7). First-person thoughts have a special role in bringing about action (see entry on *The Essential Indexical*). I may, e.g., see myself reflected in a shop window, notice that the person I see reflected is standing in the way of the street sweeper, and so judge,

(9) That person is obstructing the street sweeper.

But even if I am co-operative, I will not move out of the way unless I believe,

(10) I am obstructing the street sweeper.

If observing a self and noticing that it is in pain only allows me to judge,

(8) That self is in pain.

To judge,

(7) I am in pain.

I will have to make the judgement of numerical identity,

(11) I am that self.

It is unclear on what basis I could judge (11). Moreover, we have seen above that if a subject-predicate judgement depends upon a judgement of numerical identity, then it is OEM. It follows that if I judge (7) on the basis of (8) and (11), then (7) will be OEM. But (7) is IEM, thus I cannot judge (7) on the basis of (8) and (11). Shoemaker concludes therefore that IEM 'I'-utterances cannot be based on self-observation.

Evans (1981) attempts to give a perceptual-demonstrative account of IEM 'I'-utterances which does not fall prey to these objections. We saw above that 'I' differs from other perceptual-demonstrative terms in that I can only refer to myself using 'I', and 'I' cannot fail to refer. It follows that IEM 'I'-utterances must be based on a form of awareness that one can only have of oneself, and which does not allow for hallucination in the same way as a sense like vision, where I can seem to see an object which is not there. Evans suggests that proprioception – the 'inner' sense of one's body, its temperature, limb-position, movements, etc. – satisfies both of these conditions. Indeed, it gives rise to 'I'-utterances that are seemingly IEM. If, e.g., I feel that my legs are crossed and utter,

(12) I have my legs crossed.

I surely cannot be wrong about which person has their legs crossed. Evans holds that all IEM 'I'-utterances are based upon proprioceptive experience of one's body.

Anscombe objected to the perceptual-demonstrative account of IEM 'I'-utterances because it seemed that only introspection of a non-physical self could satisfy the relevant conditions. Evans' account silences this objection because proprioception is awareness of one's body. It can also deal with the worry raised by Shoemaker. Shoemaker claimed that observation of a self could only license a judgement such as,

(8) That self is in pain.

rather than,

(7) I am in pain.

Judgements (7) and (8) are not equivalent because, as we saw above, they have different implications for action. One might think that Shoemaker can make the same objection to Evans' account: proprioceptive experience only allows me to judge, e.g.,

(13) That body has its legs crossed.

and not the first-person judgement,

(12) I have my legs crossed.

However, proprioceptive experience allows us to act unreflectively on the information given in that experience. Suppose, e.g., that I feel a mosquito crawling on my arm, I can immediately slap my arm without thinking about doing so. In particular, I do not need to identify the arm I can feel the mosquito crawling along, as *my* arm. The way in which proprioceptive awareness has an immediate bearing on my actions suggests that it is awareness that is distinctively first-personal. It follows that it can license a first-person

judgement such as (12), not merely a judgement such as (13). Thus Evans' account does not fall prey to Shoemaker's objection.

Evans' account, however, is not free from problems. It is perhaps conceivable that I could have proprioceptive experience of another's body if my brain were appropriately 'wired' to their limbs. In such a case I might judge,

(14) I have an itch in my left foot.

But since my proprioceptive experience comes from their body, not mine, in judging (14) I misidentify the person whose left foot is itchy. Examples such as this are famously taken to show that judgements based on proprioceptive awareness of one's body are not IEM.

Wittgenstein, who is credited with first noticing that certain 'I'-utterances are IEM, gives a radically different analysis of such utterances. To understand his account we need to distinguish between utterances and judgements. I have so far spoken as if they are interchangeable. In many cases this is acceptable because utterances are often used to express judgements. Suppose, e.g., I am asked a question in class and answer,

(15) The capital of England is London.

My utterance (15) expresses a judgement that London is the capital of England – by uttering (15) I express my commitment to the existence of a particular country, the existence of a particular city, and the obtaining of a particular relation between them. However, not all utterances express judgements. Suppose, e.g., that I utter,

(16) John's donkey is drunk.

as the punchline of a joke. Unlike (15), (16) does not express a judgement – I am not committed to the existence of John or his donkey. Since an error of misidentification consists in mistakenly judging that one thing is numerically identical with another, if I make an utterance that expresses no judgement, my utterance will be IEM. When, e.g., I utter (16) I am not committing myself to the existence of some particular donkey, which I believe to be drunk. It thus makes no sense to suppose that I could misidentify the donkey in question.

Wittgenstein (1953) accounts for the IEM status of certain 'I'-utterances in this way. He argues that some present-tensed 'I'-utterances that involve psychological predicates, e.g.,

(17) I feel dazed.

cannot be understood as expressing *judgements*. Instead we should think of them as expressing one's psychological states in much the same way that groaning sometimes expresses pain. 'I'-utterances of this sort are IEM; they have this status, according to Wittgenstein, because they do not express judgements. A consequence of this view is that 'I' as it is used in these utterances, does not refer to anything. It makes no sense to talk of a groan as having a referent. Since utterances like (17) express psychological states in the same kind of way as groaning sometimes expresses pain, 'I' as it is used in (17) does not refer to anything. Most have dismissed Wittgenstein's 'no-reference thesis' as this view is called. It is also unclear how IEM 'I'-utterances involving *physical* predicates (assuming that there are such utterances) should be treated on the Wittgenstein picture. Suppose a particular bodily sensation prompts me to utter,

(12) I have my legs crossed.

It is unclear how (12) could be treated as expressing a state in the same way that groaning can be understood as expressing pain.

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Key words

First-person thought/ Immunity to error through misidentification/ Indexical/ The self

Other relevant entries

The Essential Indexical

Thought and Language, Philosophical Aspects

Sense and Reference, Philosophical Aspects