

**Phil 490: *Consciousness and the Self*  
Handout [23]**

**Sydney Shoemaker: *Self-Reference and Self-Awareness***

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**§ Goals:**

1. To diagnose the source of, and to dispel, some of the mysteriousness which surrounds the use of the word 'I.'
2. To show that the word 'I' is more fundamentally a use "as subject" rather than "as object."
3. To argue that the word 'I' is a referring expression and it has a unique referring function.
4. To criticize the view that denies the referring function of the word 'I,' and to point out that the root of this mistaken view is the perceptual theory of self-awareness.
5. To argue that self-awareness does not involve any sort of perception of oneself.
6. To present a different view: self-knowledge or self-awareness consists in the self-ascription of certain predicates — ***P*\*-predicates**. Self-knowledge is self-ascription of *P*\*-predicates.

**§ The Word 'I' as A Referring Expression**

If we consider the logical powers of first-person statements and the role played by the first person-pronoun in communication, it is clear that

- (i) in all first-person statements, the word 'I' functions as a singular term or singular referring expression.
- (ii) In all first-person statements, the word 'I' serves the function of identifying for the audience the subject to which the predicate of the statement must apply if the statement is to be true.

This is precisely the function of a referring expression.

**Shoemaker: The word 'I' is not a name, not a demonstrative pronoun, not a description, but it refers.**

***Q*: Does the word 'I' refer to anyone or anything?**



Wittgenstein: In the statement: "I have toothache" the word 'I' does not denote a possessor of the pain — No Ego is being referred to.

'I' refers to a "transcendental ego," an entity that is in principle inaccessible to sense experience.

## § Features of First-person Statements

1. **Immunity to error through misidentification:** I cannot fail to identify *myself* when I use the word 'I' even though I could be mistaken about whether I have the properties I believe myself to have.
2. **Reference without identification:** My use of the word 'I' as the subject of my statement is not due to my having identified as myself something of which I know, or believe, or wish to say, that the predicate of my statement applies to it.
3. **Fixed reference:** The rules governing the use of this word 'I' determine once and for all what its reference is to be on any given occasion of its use, namely, that its reference is to the speaker, and leave no latitude to the speaker's intentions in the determination of its reference (unlike a demonstrative).
4. **Immunity to failure of reference:** There is, as Descartes' "cogito argument" brings out, no such possibility of failure of reference in the use of the word 'I'.
5. **The referring expression of a first-person pronoun 'I':** There is an important sense in which the "use as subject" of the first-person pronouns is more fundamental than their "use as object."

## § Critique of the "No-self" View

### The No-Self view:

\_\_\_ 'I' does not refer, that there is no self, or that the self is somehow not "in the world."

1. **Nagel:** there is no description at all which is free of token-reflexive expressions and which can be substituted for 'I'; no matter how detailed a token-reflexive-free description of a person is, and whether or not it is couched in physicalistic terms, it cannot possibly entail that I am that person.
2. Nothing that I find in the world can be myself (or my Self), for there is nothing that I could observe or establish concerning any object I find in the world from which I could conclude that it is myself.

### Shoemaker's critique:

- 1) There is no reason why, in establishing whether someone is myself, I should be limited to facts about him that can be described without the use of token-reflexive expressions.
- 2) I think that this is one of the main sources of the mistaken opinion that one cannot be an object to oneself, which in turn is a source of the view that 'I' does not refer.

### [Argument #1]

1. 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.
2. But 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.
  3. Therefore, basic self-knowledge is not dependent on identification.

**[Argument #2]**

1. Identification necessarily goes together with the possibility of misidentification.
2. But in the use of 'I' there is no such possibility of misidentification.
3. Therefore, the use of 'I' is not based on identification.

**§ Self-Awareness**

**\* Not Perceptual:**

\_\_\_ Self-awareness, of the sort we are concerned with, does not involve being presented to oneself as an object.

\_\_\_ 'Awareness' in this context is *not* a kind of perception, least of all, sense-perception.

\_\_\_ The mistaken view that the word 'I' does not refer is a result of the mistaken perceptual model of self-knowledge. One tries to construe one's knowledge of the instantiation of the attribute ascribed in a self-ascription on the model of a case in which one sees or otherwise observes the instantiation of a sensory attribute, like redness, while at the same time denying that one perceives that in which the attribute is instantiated. And this, of course, leads to incoherence.

\_\_\_ The way out of this incoherence is to abandon completely, not just in part, the perceptual model of self-knowledge.

\_\_\_ Our language may suggest that pains are perceived, but it does not suggest that one perceives the feeling or the "having" of one's pain.

**\* Shoemaker's New Proposal:**

\_\_\_ **When one ascribes some particular predicates to oneself, one manifests self-knowledge or self-awareness.**

**Q: What kind of predicates whose self-ascription would imply self-knowledge?**

**[P-predicates] (Strawson)**

1. **The concept of a *person*: the concept of a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation, etc. are equally applicable to an individual entity of that type.**
2. **P-predicates have a unique logical character such that they have both self-ascribable and other-ascribable.**

M-predicates: those predicates which are also properly applied to material bodies (e.g. weighs 10 pounds, etc.)

P-predicates: all those predicates we apply to persons. (e.g. 'is smiling,' 'is in pain,' 'is thinking hard,' etc.)

3. **Other-ascription is based on observation; it uses behavioral criteria. Self-ascription is not based on observation and uses different criteria. But the two different kinds of criteria do not give the P-predicate different meanings. (Against Verificationism)**

**[P\*-predicates] (Shoemaker)**

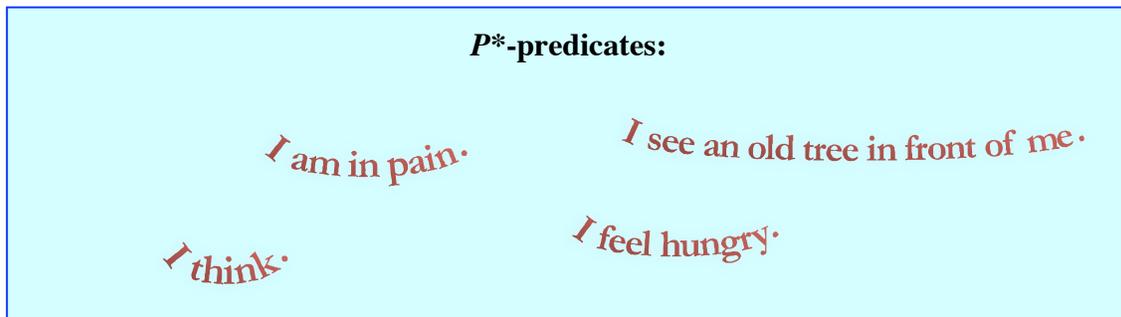
\_\_\_ There is an important and central class of psychological predicates, let us call them “P\*-predicates,” each of which can be known to be instantiated in such a way that knowing it to be instantiated in that way is equivalent to knowing it to be instantiated in oneself.

\_\_\_ The self-ascription of these predicates is immune to error through misidentification. [If I ascribe to myself that I am *P*, then *I know* that I am *P* — whatever that *P* is.]

**$\phi$  is a P\*-predicate if and only if there is a way  $\varpi$  of knowing to be instantiated such that, necessarily, *S* knows  $\phi$  to be instantiated in way  $\varpi$  if and only if *S* knows that he himself is  $\phi$ .**

*Q*: how it is possible that there should be predicates the self-ascription of which is absolutely immune to error through misidentification?

1. P\*-predicates are a central class of psychological predicates which can be known to be instantiated in such a way that knowing it to be instantiated in that way is equivalent to knowing it to be instantiated in oneself.
2. Anyone who can self-ascribe any predicate whatever thereby shows that he is potentially capable of self-ascribing some P\*-predicates to himself.



**§ Conclusion:**

The meaning of the first-person pronoun (‘I’) is given by the rule that it refers to the person who uses it; hence, the “**use as subject**” of the first-person pronoun is more fundamental than their “use as object.”

There is an important sense in which each person’s system of reference has that person himself as its anchoring point, and it is important for an understanding of the notion of reference, and also for an understanding of the notion of the mental, that we understand why and how this is so.