

*An Anscombean Reference for ‘I’?*¹

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A standard reading of Anscombe’s “The First Person” takes her to argue, via reductio, that ‘I’ must be radically non-referring. Allegedly, she analogizes ‘I’ to the expletive ‘it’ in ‘It is raining’. Hence nothing need be said about Anscombe’s understanding of “the referential functioning of ‘I’”, there being no such thing. We think that this radical reading is incorrect. Given this, a pressing question arises: How does ‘I’ refer for Anscombe, and what sort of thing do users of ‘I’ refer to? We present a tentative answer which is both consistent with much of what Anscombe says, and is also empirically/philosophically defensible.

Keywords: G. E. M. Anscombe, ‘I’, persons, immunity to error through misidentification, deflated reference, The First Person.

1. *Introduction*

Our goal in this paper is to extract a novel reading from G. E. M. Anscombe’s classic paper “The First Person” and to defend the view that we take her to hold. This is no easy feat, since much has been written about that paper—and much of that has been negative. But we believe that there is an overlooked reading of “The First Person” that is both

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consistent with much of what Anscombe says there and elsewhere and empirically/philosophically defensible.

First some stage-setting. There is a fairly standard reading in the literature on “The First Person” according to which Anscombe is arguing that the first-person pronoun ‘I’ is radically non-referring. On this “Straight” reading, far from functioning logically as a proper name, ‘I’ is instead, for Anscombe, similar to the syntactically expletive use of ‘it’ in ‘It is raining’. So read, her core argument is that ‘I’ must be non-referring since otherwise we arrive at a metaphysical view such that something like a Cartesian ego exists and is the referent of tokens of ‘I’. And according to Anscombe, that view is borderline nonsensical. Philosophers who read “The First Person” in this way include Clarke (1978), Evans (1982), Garrett (1994, 1997), Hamilton (1991), Hinton (2008), Kripke (2011), Peacock (2008), Taschek (1985), Teichmann (2008), Wiseman (2018) and van Inwagen (2001).²

In a recent paper, one of us has defended a revisionist alternative to this Straight reading of “The First Person” (Stainton 2018). Goes the idea, Anscombe can be seen to be making at least three points. The first is that ‘I’ doesn’t behave like a proper name *as proper names were understood at the time*. The second point, as we in 2018 might phrase it, is that in one *historically specific sense of ‘refer’*, ‘I’ doesn’t “refer”. Rather, ‘I’ can be used to “speak of” something (47); to “concern an object” (61 and 63); and to “specify” an object (47).³ The third is that when thinking about ‘I’, we should not be misled by surface grammar. For while ‘It is raining’ has a surface-subject term, in that context ‘it’ is non-referring (on every construal of ‘refer’), and contributes nothing to the sentence’s meaning.

Our question begins where this revisionist account leaves off. In short: if the Straight reading of “The First Person” is rejected, *how* on Anscombe’s view does ‘I’ manage to “speak of”, “specify” or “concern” things in the world? And *what* does one “speak of” when using ‘I’? To put it deliberately vaguely for now, so as not to beg any questions, our focus will be: What, to use her phrase, is the “mode of meaning” of ‘I’ for Anscombe (55)?

² One example: “Professor Anscombe’s position is that it is not the function of the word ‘I’ to refer; the word is thus unlike ‘the present kind of France’, which is in the denoting business but is a failure at it; rather, the word, despite the fact that it can be the subject of a verb or (usually in its objective-case guise, ‘me’) the object of a verb, is not in the denoting business at all... for Anscombe, the word ‘I’ refers to nothing in a way more like the way in which ‘if’ and ‘however’ refer to nothing” (van Inwagen 2001: 6). Reading Anscombe in this (standard, widespread) fashion, van Inwagen takes her view to be easily refuted: e.g., by the logical validity, due to transitivity of identity, of ‘I am Elizabeth Anscombe; Elizabeth Anscombe is the author of *Intention*; therefore, I am the author of *Intention*’. To our minds, the utter obviousness of such an objection shows that this cannot really have been Anscombe’s position on ‘I’.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all in-text citations are to Anscombe (1975).

One might be excused for wondering: Why expend so much time reconstructing, from Anscombe's text and from her larger body of philosophical work, a positive story about 'I'? In other words, why Anscombe? And why "The First Person"? Our motivation involves a mix of the historical and the substantive. The historical motivation is that such a reconstruction encourages renewed engagement with her extremely original and important work on language and mind. Anscombe is surely one of the greatest philosophical minds of the 20th Century, whose work on action theory and ethics is foundational for entire subfields. As a result, her oeuvre surely merits the same scholarly respect as that devoted to many of her male peers in the Analytic tradition, such as Austin, Davidson, Dummett, Grice, and Strawson. And one way to illustrate the importance of Anscombe's work in mind and language is by engaging directly with this underappreciated paper of hers, one that has spawned a huge literature and is jam-packed with insights—albeit ones often denigrated as fruitful ideas that appear in the context of a not-very-convincing paper.

Those are our historical motivations. Substantively, we find in "The First Person" an initially promising view about the semantics of the first-person pronoun 'I'—one worthy of further development quite independently of Anscombe's historical standing in the field. In short, even if Anscombe were not one of the founders of the Analytic tradition, her insights and arguments in "The First Person" would still be worth taking seriously.

So much by way of stage-setting; here is our plan going forward. We begin with methodological remarks. Next, we explicate some Anscombean observations about 'I' that any successful account of its "mode of meaning" must accommodate. We then present our positive view: in particular, we will attribute to Anscombe the insight that 'I' has (what we call) a "deflated reference". We then argue that this view is plausible both as a tentative piece of Anscombe exegesis as well as a substantive proposal about the syntax and semantics of 'I'. We conclude with some objections and replies.

2. *Methodological Preliminaries*

Our twin motivations lead us to adopt a certain methodological approach: a sort of history of philosophy that lies between two poles. It is not philosophy-focused history nor is it historically-inspired philosophical problem solving. Our neither-fish-nor-fowl methodology yields twin criteria for success. First, the better our reconstruction fits with the text and with the author's larger corpus and philosophical milieu, the better the reconstruction. Second, the more promising the reconstruction is *qua* substantive account of the phenomenon, the better it is.

These two criteria are potentially conflicting. One would like to be charitable to the author, but one doesn't want to be too charitable. Great philosophers get things wrong and we certainly acknowledge that Ans-

combe's work, both in "The First Person" and elsewhere, is imperfect: her writing style is often obscure and she is sometimes too dismissive of opposing or conflicting views. Relatedly, a "perfectly charitable" reading threatens to be anachronistic. So, our approach requires balancing out "what Anscombe really thought in the early 1970s" against "what we can learn from her about our present-day issues."

Putting a positive spin on this difficult balancing act, both poles stand to benefit from a satisfying answer to our target question; it could provide a useful departure point for each. It would also provide indirect support for the conclusion of the companion negative paper mentioned above: that Anscombe eschews the radical non-referring view becomes all the more plausible if our hypotheses herein are on the right track.

3. *Anscombe on 'I'*

Moving beyond methodological commitments, we turn to some core elements of "The First Person". Anscombe's free-flowing style resists regimentation, but many authors would agree that her positive remarks about the way 'I' functions can be distilled into a handful of observations.

Observation #1: Immunity to Certain Errors

According to Anscombe, 'I' seems to be immune to reference failure: "If 'I' is a name, it cannot be an empty name" (55). 'I' appears equally immune to a certain kind of error regarding mistaken identification: "Guaranteed reference [in this latter sense] would entail a guarantee, not just that there is such a thing as X, but also that what I take to be X is X (57). Or again: "[The 'I'-user cannot] take the wrong object to be the object he means by 'I'" (57). Here is an example designed to support those generalizations:

Rob: I am smoking

Andrew: #You're right that someone is smoking, but the person you intended by 'I' is actually Juanita, not Rob

'I' in the first sentence cannot fail to refer. (Or so it seems. The point will be revisited below.) This contrasts with, for example, the expression 'The man with the hat' in 'The man with the hat is smoking'. A speaker, say Rob Stainton, could use it when looking at what is in fact a trick of the light, and thereby fail to refer to anything. More intriguingly, the absurdity of the second sentence highlights that a speaker cannot wish to refer to one thing with 'I' and yet somehow end up referring to something else. Again, contrast 'The man with the hat is smoking'. It is perfectly possible for Rob Stainton to use it to pick out, and talk about, a woman with a large, geometrical hairdo; and a perfectly sensible reply could be 'You're right that someone is smoking, but the person you intended by 'The man with the hat' is actually a woman with a curious head of hair'.

To come at the point another way, 'I/myself' seems to have an "indirect reflexive" use such that *I spoke of myself, but I didn't know it* is not possible. On that use, someone saying 'I cannot misidentify the referent—so, such a confusion cannot arise. Here again, this is to be sharply contrasted with the "direct reflexive" in 'When I spoke of the man with the hat, I spoke of myself, but didn't know it', where such misidentification is perfectly possible.

Observation #2: Immunity to Doubt

The foregoing facts about immunity-to-referential-error also yield epistemological consequences. Though I (that is, Rob Stainton) can doubt whether Rob Stainton exists, thinks, and so on, I cannot doubt whether *I* exist, think, and so on. Relatedly, while I can doubt whether I (that is, Rob Stainton) am Rob Stainton, I cannot doubt (in the "indirect reflexive" use) whether I am me. So 'I-talk seems to rule out certain skeptical worries.

Observation #3: Bodily Properties

A third Anscombean observation is that if 'I' refers, then one can conceive of it doing so in the absence of a body altogether, or indeed in the absence of any bodily sensations. In support of this view, Anscombe introduces a much-discussed Tank Thought Experiment: in an imagined situation of utter sensory deprivation, urges Anscombe, a person can still think: 'I won't let this happen again' (58). To support the same conclusion, she proposes a Body-As-Puppet Thought Experiment. The following sentence, suggests Anscombe, could be used and understood in a conceivable conversation: 'When I say 'I', that does not mean this human being who is making the noise. I am someone else who has borrowed this human being to speak through' (60). Here, it does seem that what 'I' would refer to need not be any kind of physical body.

Observation #4: Perception and Action

Finally, the observation that, say, the man in the hat is in danger (where the man in the hat is, as a matter of fact, Andrew Botterell) can have quite different action-generating effects than the observation that *I* (that is, Andrew Botterell) am in danger. Closely related to this, 'I' can be used to express an intention to act in a certain way. This is very different from using 'I' to make empirically-based predictions about how a certain body (for example, that of Andrew Botterell) will behave in the future (56).

By way of summary, contrast the name 'René Descartes'. It lacks many of the foregoing features. For example, the following discourse makes perfect sense:

Rob: René Descartes is smoking.

Andrew: You're right that someone is smoking, but the person you intended by 'René Descartes' is actually Baruch Spinoza, not René Descartes.

This shows that proper names are not immune to certain sorts of reference-errors. The same can be said about immunity to doubt: while René can doubt whether he is René Descartes, he cannot doubt that he is himself (in the "indirect reflexive" sense).

Moreover, as we read her, Anscombe would *disagree* that 'René Descartes' might refer to a disembodied soul or Cartesian ego. As we will discuss below, Anscombe thinks that it's built into the meaning of 'Chicago' that it refers to a city; similarly, it's built into the meaning of 'René Descartes' that it refers to some sort of embodied animal, specifically a human male.⁴ Finally, the action-generating effects of 'René is in danger' are comparable to those of 'The man in the hat is in danger'; they aren't like those of 'I am in danger'.

In addition to these four positive observations, "The First Person" contains several negative points about how *not* to account for them. First, Anscombe notes that attributing to 'I' a special "descriptive sense" (in the Frege-inspired sense) won't do the trick. This holds even if what is proposed is a sense that is merely envisioned by the speaker: e.g., a sortal intended by the speaker to fix the referent of the bare demonstrative 'this'. In particular, according to Anscombe, one must not assign a descriptive sense to 'I' that would lead to a Descartes-type mentalistic "self" being the referent of 'I', such that: I have infallible knowledge of that mental "self"; aspects of it are "private" in that only I can have knowledge of those; and the "self" is made of some queer non-bodily substance that explains these properties. Anscombe also warns that one should not attempt to ensure guaranteed reference by having the pronoun pick out only the me-right-this-instant. Rather, 'I' must be capable of specifying entities that have a temporal extension.

It is on the basis of these arguments and observations that Anscombe (in)famously concludes with the seemingly extraordinary claims that have animated the Straight reading:

- (i) Logically speaking, 'I' is not a name (53 and 56);
- (ii) 'I' does not involve singular reference (53);
- (iii) 'I' does not refer to the 'I'-user (56);
- (iv) 'I' is not a singular term whose role is to make a reference (56 and 58);

⁴ To anticipate, this may prove one part of the reason why, in Anscombe's view, 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' is *not* an identity proposition: we will urge that, for her, 'I' specifies a person in the forensic sense; and that person is (as one might variously put it) merely connected with/realized by/composed of a living human male body. If the person-*qua*-moral-agent and her body are not one and the same thing then (even though 'I' is used to "speak of" things, hence not an expletive), Anscombe's infamous claim about 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' looks reasonable.

- (v) 'I' is neither a name nor another kind of expression whose logical role is to make a reference, *at all* (60)

4. On 'Referring'

Recall our deliberately vague target question: What, according to Anscombe, is the "mode of meaning" of 'I'? How might we go about answering this question? We think it is best to proceed in stages. First, recognize that it is only "inflated" reference that is being rejected by Anscombe. Second, identify an alternative that fits better with her text and larger philosophy.

To begin with, it is clear that the then-current Frege-inspired conception of reference builds in a great deal. It requires that proper names have a descriptive sense that is synonymous with a definite description. Empty names aside, that sense fixes a substantial objective thing as the referent of a name.⁵ It also licenses various *a priori* entailments and analytic necessities (e.g., the descriptive sense of 'Chicago' *a priori* entails that it is a city; and this is, as a matter of meaning, a necessary feature of Chicago). To elaborate with a notorious example, assuming 'Hesperus' has as its descriptive content *first heavenly body visible at night*, this descriptive content would simultaneously fix the referent as Venus and make the name synonymous with the noun phrase 'The first heavenly body visible at night'. As a result, it will be analytic that Hesperus is a heavenly body; anyone who knows the meaning of the name will know *a priori* that this is the case; and the heavenly-body status will be necessary. Reference (of this "inflated" variety) also requires, second, that the speaker *intend* a descriptive content (56): typically, this will coincide with the descriptive content of the term, although the speaker may unwittingly intend a different content, thereby fixing a different "speaker's referent". Turning now from the reference relation to the thing referred to, an "inflated referent" must, third, be a "distinctly identifiable"/"distinctively conceived subject" (65) having clear identity conditions (53). Finally, the required descriptive content and the required "objective/robust" nominatum jointly explain not just epistemological and metaphysical features of the term, but also psychological ones: e.g., that perfectly rational agents can fail to realize that Hesperus is Phosphorus is explained thereby.

⁵ Textual evidence that Anscombe demands a conception/sense for "name-like words" and for "reference" (as she uses those terms), includes: "We seem to need a sense to be specified for this quasi-name 'I'. To repeat the Frege point: we haven't got this sense just by being told which object a man will be speaking of, whether he knows it or not, when he says 'I... [If] 'I' expresses a way its object is reached by him, what Frege called an "Art des Gegebensein", we want to know what that way is and how it comes about that the only object reached in that way by anyone is identical with himself" (48). Also: "The use of a name for an object is connected with a conception of that object. And so we are driven to look for something that, for each 'I'-user, will be the conception related to the supposed name 'I...'" (51–52).

On the view that we are extracting from “The First Person”, ‘I’ does not exhibit reference of this “inflated” sort. ‘I’ has instead only a “deflated reference”, in at least three senses: a deflated referring relation, a deflated referent, and a deflated psycho-philosophical explanatory burden. Let us unpack these, each time taking philosophically inspiration from other authors.

A. *Deflated Referring Relation*

To explain what we have in mind when we talk about ‘I’ having a deflated *referring relation*, we borrow from David Kaplan’s work on “pure indexicals”. According to Kaplan (1989), such terms have no descriptive sense associated with them. Rather, they obey a rule-of-use that outputs an object given a context of utterance. Importantly for our purposes, pure indexicals (including ‘I’) don’t invoke the intentions of the speaker. Anscombe herself phrases the rule-of-use for ‘I’ thus: “If *X* makes assertions with ‘I’ as subject, then those assertions will be true if and only if the predicates used thus assertively are true of *X*” (55).⁶

B. *Deflated Referent*

The rule-of-use proposed above requires that there be *something* that a token of ‘I’ concerns or specifies. Critically, the rule does not itself fix whether that something is a soul, a mental substance, a body, etc. It merely says that the thing-asserting, whatever it be, is what will make the assertion true or false. As we read Anscombe, it will be facts about our world that settle which things turn out to be assertion-makers hereabouts.

Anscombe clearly does not believe that assertion-makers are chunks of Cartesian inner mental substance. She eschews any such thing as nonsensical. But then what can be the deflated alternative? What else, for her, can stand in for *X*?

We can find something suitably Anscombean if we move away from a preoccupation with a Descartes-inspired mentalistic “self” and towards something very different. An important kindred spirit, we think, is Peter Strawson (1953, 1959, 1966). According to him, and putting things crudely, there is a gradient among “individuals” running from the most primitive proto-individuals with mere feature-placing (e.g., raining or smelling foul hereabouts) to the most robust—countable, clearly individuated, self-standing, and explanatory objects (e.g., the dog Fido). Crucially for the positive view that we are reconstructing, and consonant with Anscombe’s philosophical *foci*, along this continuum there can be individuals that are a (mere?) *locus of ethical evaluation and*

⁶ More cautiously, and as Anscombe herself explicitly recognized in her *Post Scriptum* at p. 65, because of the existence of “oblique” contexts this proposed rule-of-use for ‘I’ would need to be revised somewhat. It should read something like: ‘... those assertions will *ordinarily* be true if and only if...’. Oblique contexts would then be treated as non-ordinary exceptions. More on this below.

intentional action: persons in the “offenses against the person” sense, to use Anscombe’s well-fitted phrase (61). So understood, persons are very unlike the philosopher’s mind-internal “selves”: persons are not distinctly identifiable subjects whose queer nature (causally) explains the emergence of normatively evaluable actions. Nonetheless, we are suggesting that they *are* (intersubjectively observable) “objects” that one can straightforwardly talk about—indeed, in the usual case, the sorts of things that exhibit the features of ethical evaluation and rational action are, for Anscombe, living human bodies (61).

A related insight can be found in Amie Thomasson’s writings (see, e.g., her 2010). An important line of thought therein is that the ontological scruples of Quine (1948)—which require precise individuation conditions, reducibility to the physical sciences, etc., before something can be counted as a genuine object—are overly demanding. To the contrary, many perfectly respectable entities fail to meet such arch conditions: silences, holes, storms, academic disciplines, Nominalism, folk songs, and so on. These too would all be, in our sense, “deflated referents”. These ideas apply to “The First Person” in the following way: a referent for ‘I’ need not have precise identity conditions. Instead, what it is for there to be an individual, “the person”, for which the first-person personal pronoun ‘I’ can stand, is merely for there to be something-or-other that acts rationally, and that is subject to normative evaluation. Relatedly, to demand that the existence of persons, in this forensic sense, explains how there come to be normatively evaluable actions gets things the wrong way around. (Compare: “Rules are prior to and explain behavioral patterns and (in)correctness”. No, says the Wittgensteinian, it is because there are behavioral patterns and (in)correctness that it’s proper to recognize a rule.)

One should identify the referential locus of ‘I’ as the person, forensically understood, not merely because of persons’ centrality to action theory and ethics, but also because, as Anscombe says, “only thoughts of actions, postures, movements and intended actions... are unmediated and non-observational” (63). Coming at things this way, one can take Anscombe’s unmediated access comments seriously, but without positing a “distinctly conceived subject” with mysterious causal power that achieve such access—because such access is constitutive of Anscombean persons. Put metaphorically, the person provides a kind of “bridge” between the word ‘I’ and unmediated access: ‘I’ is connected to persons, as per our “deflated referent” story; persons, for Anscombe, are inherently connected to thoughts of actions and intentions; which thoughts are connected, for her, in an unmediated way to movements, postures, etc.

C. *Deflated Explanatory Burden*

We have argued that, for Anscombe, ‘I’ is associated with a deflated reference relation, and that the kind of things that ‘I’ in fact tends to

specify, at a context, are deflated entities. But there is a third aspect to our deflationary approach. That aspect concerns issues about epistemology and explanation; and our inspiration this time is the work of Emma Borg (2004), and Herman Cappelen and Ernie Lepore (2004).

The general idea that we draw upon is that the lexical semantics for words should not be expected to explain, all on their own, their associated psychology, epistemology, and metaphysics. To give but one example, the semantics of 'rich' need not specify how much money a person must have in order to be rich. Still less must the semantics of 'rich' address the philosophical question of whether a society with extremely rich people and extremely poor ones can be just. In a similar vein, there will be aspects of the use of 'I', and of 'I'-users, that needn't be explained by the pronoun's "mode of meaning": think here of the peculiarities of self-knowledge, or the conditions for the persistence of persons over time.

Reading in deflation of this third sort is, we concede, a bigger exegetical stretch. There is solid textual evidence in "The First Person" for ascribing a mere rule-of-use which, as a matter of fact, applies to persons. In this case, the main motivation is different, driven more by read-the-text-as-promising considerations. As hinted, the three deflationary moves don't entail each other. Nonetheless, all play an essential role: in that sense, they require each other. Specifically, given deflation of the other two sorts, "explanatory deflation" is necessary to account for some of Anscombe's observations.

The exegetical stretch notwithstanding, there are some fit-with-the-corpus considerations that merit mention. First, it pays to remember that Anscombe's general philosophical methodology is reminiscent of J.L. Austin's: cautious not just in preaching but in practice; open to complexities and nuanced details; and comfortable with unresolved *aporias*. (*Intention* is an obvious, and brilliant, example.) In other work Anscombe at least sometimes approached philosophical problems with a divide-and-conquer attitude. To mention one especially notorious example, in her "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958) she holds that there are some issues that are properly the burden of philosophy of psychology rather than of moral philosophy *per se*. Second, Anscombe was aware that phenomena of a similar nature arose in the absence of the lexical item 'I', e.g. in words such as 'now' and 'here'. Indeed, she mentions Casteñeda (1967) in a footnote. Similarly, she recognized that the same sort of phenomena show up with third person pronouns. For instance, 'Rob wanted to win, but didn't know this' is *not* made true by Rob wanting the 50 year-old Canadian philosopher to win, even though Rob was the 50 year-old Canadian philosopher in question. Anscombe was also keenly aware of first person *thoughts*, which arguably are not to be explained wholly by features of English pronouns. Third, there is one clear bit of textual support for our attribution of "explanatory deflation". Anscombe writes: "There is no objection to the topic of reidentifi-

cation of selves—it is one of the main interests of the philosophers who write about selves—but this is not any part of the role of ‘I’” (52–53).

It’s worth ending this section by stressing, to avoid misunderstanding, that we are not discounting Anscombe’s insights about the specialness of the first person. We take them very seriously. It is, however, consistent with that to expect that something beyond the context-sensitive rule-of-use for ‘I’ will help account for them.

5. *Defending our Answer*

This concludes our presentation of our proposed “Anscombean reference for ‘I’”. We turn more squarely now to the task of championing it. That requires defending it with respect to both our desiderata: the better our reconstruction fits with the text, the better; and the more promising the reconstruction is *qua* substantive account of the phenomena being investigated, the better.

Applied to any reconstruction of Anscombe’s “The First Person”, this yields two constraints: first, any putative reconstruction must comport with the four positive observations made by Anscombe; and second, any putative reconstruction must be at least initially promising and worthy of further investigation and development as a view about what we have been calling the “mode of meaning” of ‘I’. We will defend our account first by addressing both constraints, and then by responding to some objections.

Let us begin with Anscombe’s four positive observations about ‘I’ to see how our proposed reconstruction fits with them. Our proposed rule-of-use for ‘I’—namely that if *X* makes assertions with ‘I’ as subject, then those assertions will be true if and only if the predicates used assertively are true of *X*—together with facts about what contexts of utterance almost always look like in our world, explains the near guarantee that any given use of ‘I’ will have a referent. Setting aside some famously puzzling cases (*cf.* Predelli 2005), there will almost always be a speaker in the context of utterance to serve as the target of the rule. Regarding misidentification, because no referent is intended with a pure indexical, there’s no possibility of an error-inducing conflict between the intended referent and what the rule-of-use specifies.

Second, and again because of the associated rule-of-use for ‘I’, it follows that where ‘I’ is used there typically won’t be genuine doubt that there is a speaker. Granted, full-blown Cartesian-style immunity to doubt isn’t automatically ruled out by our reconstruction. Like Wittgenstein, however, Anscombe herself was very skeptical about claims of infallible first-person knowledge of facts. Moreover, embracing “deflated reference”, it ceases to be a task of the semantic rule for ‘I’ to explain entirely on its own the perplexing epistemology of self-knowledge. To demand that is patently to demand too much.

Third, because there is no descriptive sense associated with ‘I’, there is no prediction that the output of the semantic rule associated with ‘I’

must be fixed via bodily properties, nor even via sensory ones. What if, *qua* metaphysician of mind, one wants every 'I'-user to be bodily? We have no problem with such a proposal. Indeed, as noted, our proposed rule-of-use is consistent with it. But our claim, again, is that you shouldn't ask the lexical entry for the first-person pronoun, all by itself, to guarantee that for you. The rule is "metaphysically silent" in that regard.

Fourth, and finally, consider in connection with the special action-guiding nature of 'I' two points that lead to the same result. David Kaplan (1989) and John Perry (1979) have proposed that the "character" for a word can play an autonomous role in generating action. If they are correct, we can already expect 'Rob Stainton is in danger' and 'I am in danger' to have different behavioral proclivities because of *how* the object gets specified when 'I', as opposed to a name, is used.⁷ Second, as explained above, for Anscombe thoughts of actions, intentions, movements, etc., are unmediated and non-observational; and these features are central to persons in her forensic sense. So, given the deflated referent we are proposing, there will exist a special connection between what a token of 'I' specifies (hereabouts) and dispositions to act.

Reading Anscombe as working implicitly with a "deflated" notion of reference would fit well with her important observations about some philosophical peculiarities of 'I'. Our revisionist reading has another advantage: it doesn't commit Anscombe to glaringly false predictions about the syntactic and logico-semantic behavior of 'I'. To explain, we will first contrast the linguistic behavior of the expletive 'it' with that of noun phrases which exhibit a relatively "deflated" kind of reference. We then show that 'I' *obviously* patterns with the latter. This makes our reading the more charitable of the two.

In terms of syntax, being a "dummy element" with no reference, the expletive pronoun 'it' cannot license aponic gaps which themselves have a referring role. Thus consider (1):

1. *It₁ seems that John is rich and [e₁ allowed him to buy the house]
This sentence strikes us as full-on ungrammatical; there's no question that it's odd. The reason is not that its meaning would be peculiar: 'It seems that John is rich and that fact allowed him to buy the house' is a perfectly fine way of expressing the thought which (1) gestures at. Instead, the issue is that the dummy subject 'it' is genuinely radically non-referring—so, the expletive provides no reference-source for the unpronounced subject of the second conjunct. (Consider also the strange-sounding 'It₁ fell to -20 degrees and e₁ froze the pipes'.) Being radically non-referring, the expletive 'it' also cannot form referential nominal compounds:

⁷ In their discussions of "The First Person", both O'Brien (1994) and Rumfitt (1994: 625ff) make suggestions very roughly along these lines. O'Brien (1994: 280) suggests, e.g., that mastery of the rule-of-use for 'I' will *ipso facto* bring to light the metalinguistic fact that 'I' is a device of *reflexive* self-reference.

2. **[It and [the cloud]] seem likely to pour rain*

And 'it' cannot receive focal stress; nor can it appear unembedded:

3. **It seems likely to pour rain*

4. Andrew: Do you expect snow?

Rob: **It, it!*

Regarding logico-semantic features, the 'it' in question goes with zero-place predicates: the whole *raison d'être* of an expletive is to serve as surface subject to inflected verbs which do not take genuine arguments. Relatedly, sentences with expletive subjects do not license existential generalization. Witness the bizarreness of:

5. It is raining in Florida and it is snowing in Wisconsin. Therefore, there is something which is raining in Florida and snowing in Wisconsin

We now contrast how other "deflated referents" work, in terms of their syntax and logico-semantics. We will consider two examples: 'that rain storm' and 'his longstanding silence'.

As a preliminary, it's worth highlighting the respects in which these two count as "deflated" by our lights. In each case, the referent lies closer to the "feature-placing" end of the spectrum-of-individuals as opposed to its "self-standing subject" end. Relatedly, it is hard to individuate rain storms and long silences, and hard to count them. Turning from the referent to the reference relation, because of the context-sensitivity built into 'that' and 'his', in both examples the reference is not fixed solely by a descriptive sense. Finally, the explanatory powers of rain storms and longstanding silences are *comparatively impoverished*: e.g., it offers no great insight to explain precipitation by appeal to a rain storm, nor quiet by appeal to a long silence. (To explain the italics above: we do grant that, e.g., one can explain a puddle by appeal to a recent rain storm, and a baby's successful nap by appeal to silence around the house. It is the relative depth and nature of the explanation which is at issue: in these examples, they incline towards the "deflated".)

Now, such deflated noun phrases do license aponic gaps which, in their turn, refer:

6. [That rain storm]₁ lasted for hours and e₁ was really frightening

7. Irma had a meeting with Ahmed. She called for [his longstanding silence]₁ [e₁ to end]

Both can serve as constituents in nominal compounds which themselves serve as referential-type arguments. For instance, in (8) 'that rain storm' conjoins with 'the dog which kept barking' to yield an argument to 'kept Sean awake'.

8. [_{NP} [That rain storm] and [the dog which kept barking]] kept Sean awake

Example (9) illustrates the same point:

9. I am fed up with [_{NP} [his ugly mug] and [his longstanding silence]]

As a final point about syntax, both 'that rain storm' and 'his longstanding silence' can receive stress and appear unembedded:

10. *That rain storm* kept me awake, not the barking dog
 11. That rain storm! That damned rain storm!
 12. I can live with Ahmed's messiness. But *his longstanding silence* drives me mad!

So much for their syntax. The logico-semantics of comparatively "deflated" noun phrases is also very different from expletives. They go with verbs that take genuine arguments, as illustrated already by (6), (10) and (12). And from these sentences one can draw valid existential inferences: respectively, that something lasted for hours; that something kept Andrew awake; and that something drives the speaker mad.

So much for the contrasts. As *we* interpret Anscombe, her view predicts that 'I' should pattern with 'that rain storm' and 'his longstanding silence', not with the 'it' of 'it seems' and 'it's raining'. This prediction is borne out.

'I' licenses anaphoric gaps and 'I' coordinates with patently referential nouns to form nominal compounds:

13. [_I want [_e₁ to dance] or [_e₁ to leave]]
 14. [[_{NP} [_{NP} John] and I] love jazz]

The first person pronoun in English can readily receive stress, as in (15). And it can appear unembedded (in the accusative case), as in (16):

15. *I* won the race, not Ahmed
 16. Andrew: Who wants tickets to Radiohead?
 Rob: Me, me!

Like clear cases of "deflated" noun phrases, the first person pronoun can also serve as argument to predicates generally, whatever their arity: 'I smoke', 'Alice likes me' and 'Alice gave me a book' are all perfectly fine. (Relatedly, if Irma says 'I smoke' and Ahmed says 'Irma smokes', they agree. Notice that this is not predicted by the 'I-as-expletive view'.) Finally, comparable to (6), (10) and (12), sentences containing 'I/me' license existential generalization: 'I smoke' entails that there exists something which smokes; 'Alice likes me' entails that there exists something which Alice likes, etc.

Our brief discussion of the syntax and logico-semantics of 'I' shows, on the one hand, that our reconstruction is promising as a substantive account of the first person pronoun's "mode of meaning". On the other hand, our reconstruction is exegetically superior because it avoids committing Anscombe to a range of obvious falsehoods about how 'I' behaves linguistically. This completes our positive defense of the reconstruction. We turn, in the next section, to objections that require rebuttal.

6. *Objections and Replies*

We have now canvassed what we take to be an initially plausible “variety of reference” (as one might nowadays call it) that can be extracted from Anscombe’s “The First Person”, and we have argued that our revisionist reading of “The First Person” meets our two desiderata: it complies with Anscombe’s four positive observations, and it is independently promising as a view about what we have been calling the “mode of meaning” of ‘I’. Moreover, *if* Anscombe was grasping for such an account of the semantic functioning (or “mode of meaning”) of ‘I’, then, far from having committed an egregious linguistic blunder in that famous paper, she was in fact anticipating ideas that remain prevalent and important today.

But was she? Before defending ‘Yes’ as the appropriate answer, a reminder about our project is in order. If we were undertaking philosophy-focused history, a number of avenues of research would suggest themselves immediately. One could look into whether Anscombe’s correspondence provides evidence of such a view, or whether marginal notes in the works she was reading at the time suggest it. One could try to trace which exact passages in her fellow Oxbridge philosophers might have inspired such a position on the linguistic role of ‘I’, etc.⁸ Such questions—fascinating and worth pursuing—are not, however, our concern in the present paper. Still, a charitable and insightful reconstruction of the paper’s arguments and conclusions requires, at a minimum, two things: first, internal consistency; and second, consistency with the philosophical milieu in which she was working and writing. So let us turn to some objections that touch on these considerations.

A. *On ‘Referring’*

The first objection to our reading of “The First Person” is straightforward: our proposed interpretation simply doesn’t fit with all the things Anscombe says about ‘I’ not referring. With this general observation we agree. But as argued in Stainton (2018), this complaint is merely terminological. Anscombe’s (at that time perfectly apt) use of the vocable /ref(ə)r(ə)ns/ does not entail, even for Anscombe, that ‘I’ fails to have a rule-of-reference in *our 21st Century sense of ‘reference’*. Our claim, recall, is that as we in 2018 might phrase it Anscombe is merely urging that in *one historically specific sense of ‘refer’* that she was working with, ‘I’ doesn’t “refer”. But it is perfectly consistent with this view that ‘I’ can be used to “speak of” something; to “concern an object”; to “make an assertion about” something; and to “specify” an object”. In other words, on our revisionist reading ‘I’ *does* refer for Anscombe, at least on

⁸ There is also the concern that, so far as we have been able to establish, Anscombe never regretted nor retracted the phraseology of “The First Person” once “thinner” notions of reference became more standard.

the modern understanding of 'refer'. (Anscombe writes: "a self *can* be thought of as what 'I' stands for, or indicates, without taking 'I' as a proper name" (52). This seems to endorse the idea that 'I' does indeed "refer" in our "deflated" sense, but not in the "inflated" way that proper names were assumed to.)

B. On "Missing Discussions"

A second objection. There are discussions that one would expect to find in Anscombe's text if our "deflated" re-reading were correct—discussions, in particular, of other kinds of "deflated" referring which seem to belong in the same ballpark. Specifically, one would expect to find treatments of other terms which have only a rule-of-use that requires no intention, such as 'today' and 'here'. If she were offering a deflationary take on the "mode of meaning" of 'I', and if she really was concerned to put forward an allegedly novel variety of reference, surely she would have discussed similar context-sensitive words? They would be grist for her mill, if our interpretation were on the right track. And wouldn't she address Kripke-style views of names, according to which even they aren't "inflated"?

One can't explain away these seeming lacunae in terms of a lack of knowledge or a mere oversight. Anscombe was clearly aware of the existence of such context-sensitive items: again, she cites Castañeda (1967) in connection with the distinction between direct and indirect reflexive uses of 'I' and other pronouns. Similarly for names as directly referential: Anscombe mentions Kripke, in particular criticizing him for trying to recast the Cartesian argument in a way that downplays the centrality of 'I'.

Our reply has to do with the central aim of "The First Person". It is too seldom stressed that its objective is to rebut a neo-Cartesian semantic argument for mind-body dualism. That argument contains as a premise, in effect, that 'I' has "inflated" reference, and that this fixes the nominatum as non-bodily. That is, the very first paragraph of "The First Person" is not a mere historical preamble, but instead states the topic of the paper:

Descartes and St. Augustine share not only the argument *Cogito ergo sum*—in Augustine *Si fallor, sum*—but also the corollary argument claiming to prove that *the mind* (Augustine) or, as Descartes puts it, *this I*, is not any kind of body... The first-person character of Descartes' argument means that each person must administer it to himself in the first person; and the assent to St Augustine's various propositions will equally be made, if at all, by appropriating them in the first person. In these writers there is the assumption that when one says 'I' or 'the mind', one is *naming something* such that the knowledge of its existence, which is a knowledge of itself as thinking in all the various modes, determines what it is that is known to exist (45, our emphasis).

Given this focus on 'I' as name-like, there is a good reason why Anscombe would by-pass the workings of 'here', 'today', etc. Her focus was rightly on how 'I' *does not* work. We are proposing a positive account of 'I's functioning, based on clues from the text. But Anscombe's aim was different: it was to shut down this neo-Cartesian argument at its very outset. In light of this, though perhaps it would have been illuminating as an aside, a discussion of other terms in the same "deflated" ballpark would have been just that: an aside. (Anscombe writes: "To say all this is to treat 'I' as a sort of proper name. That's what gets us into this jam" (48).)

As for why she elided discussion of Kripke's views, a first point is that early 70s Oxbridge had simply not yet embraced his lessons about direct reference. In any case, Anscombe just *does* take proper names to be sense-bearing; this seems to be non-negotiable for her. What's more, if Kripke were right that even names lacked descriptive senses, then the neo-Cartesian semantic argument couldn't get off the ground. Thus Kripke, far from proving an opponent, would be offering up another path to the same no-sense-for-'I' conclusion.

Thus, whatever she may have had in mind as she wrote, it was perfectly reasonable for Anscombe to have avoided making positive claims about semantic similarities between 'I' on the one hand and other "pure indexicals" on the other. And it was perfectly reasonable for her to side-step discussion of Kripke's newfangled views on names.

C. *On Identity Propositions*

A third objection is arguably the most pressing. Recall that according to our revisionist interpretation of "The First Person" the first-person pronoun 'I' is associated with a referent. But if that's the case, how could Anscombe hold that a sentence of the form 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' does not express an identity proposition? Worse, her infamous claim fits very well with the "Straight" reading that we are challenging: if 'I' is an expletive, then of course 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' will not express an identity.

We have three replies. First, because the referent is deflated on the view we are attributing to Anscombe, there isn't *the right kind of object* for an identity. Being merely a locus for feature-placing, there are no clear individuation conditions for the thing "spoken of"/"specified" by 'I'; so if genuine identity requires "robust" objects satisfying precise Quinean individuation conditions, then it follows that there won't be person-involving identities (in that exigent sense).

Second, because the reference relation is deflated, there are not two senses, each corresponding to the same object. But since Fregeans require this for an (informative) identity statement, there won't by Anscombe's lights be any such statements involving 'I'.

Third, because of the deflated "metaphysical and explanatory power" of 'I', the first person pronoun on its own does not fix or entail the

nature of the thing-which-asserts. In particular, it does not fix it as a kind of body. In contrast, according to Anscombe the proper name 'Elizabeth Anscombe', as a matter of analytic entailment, must refer to a certain kind of animal, namely a human, female animal. Worse for "real identities", and revisiting a point from footnote 4, Anscombe's view seems to be that 'I'-users turn out to be persons in the forensic sense, and these are only "intimately connected" with bodies. So again, 'I am Elizabeth Anscombe' cannot state an identity proposition in the relevant sense. (That Anscombe is rejecting only "identity statements" *construed in some philosophically strict way* is suggested by her acknowledgement at the outset of her paper that there is a "mundane, practical, everyday sense" in which 'I am Descartes' can be true (46).)

Here is another way at our main point. Ask: why, according to Anscombe, is 'Elizabeth is Anscombe' a genuine identity statement? The answer is: because the referent of both 'Elizabeth' and 'Anscombe' is a robust, countable human body; and because there is a sense associated with both proper names, each yielding the same nominatum. Also, we have not just an intimate connection between Elizabeth and Anscombe, but one single thing. Now compare this with the case of 'I'.

7. Conclusion

Many readers have taken Anscombe to hold a radical non-referring view about 'I', according to which 'I' is a sort of expletive pronoun. Such a view, however, fits poorly with numerous points made explicitly by Anscombe in her paper; it is also manifestly incorrect about both the surface syntax and logico-semantics of 'I'. Fair engagement both with Anscombe as a founder of the Analytic tradition and with her exceptionally insightful paper requires us, therefore, to identify a "mode of meaning" for 'I' that coheres better with her text and with her larger philosophy, as well as with certain empirically obvious facts about the first person pronoun.

With that in mind we have proposed an "Anscombean reference for 'I'" which is deflated along three axes: first, the reference *relation* does not involve a descriptive sense, but only a rule-of-use where intentions are otiose; second, the *referent* is a "person" in the forensic sense of that term; and third, the *explanatory burden* of "Anscombean reference" in epistemology, psychology, and metaphysics is fairly limited, so that many of the puzzling aspects of the first person must be explained by something other than the lexical semantics of 'I'.

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