

Title: “I”-states.

“I”-states are mental states which are most naturally ascribed (by the subject whose states they are) through a sentence containing the first-person pronoun within the scope of an attitude verb. The most influential accounts of “I”-states have emphasized the distinctive relationship such states stand in to certain ways of gaining information and/or actions. In this paper, I do three things: I say what reason there is for thinking that some account of this basic sort is correct; I show that the best developed accounts of this sort (those provided by Gareth Evans, Francois Recanati and John Perry) faces serious problems, and I put forward an account (of the same sort) which avoids those problems. My account differs from Perry’s in denying that there is any distinctive relationship in which all and only “I”-states stand to actions. It differs from Evans’s and Recanati’s in its characterization of the relationship between “I”-states and ways of gaining information. It differs from all three in focusing on a relationship that holds among different “I”-states. Not much attention has been paid to this relationship. It turns out though that no account which ignores it can be correct. One of the main contributions of this paper is to begin the work of saying exactly what that relationship is.

“I”-states are mental states which are most naturally ascribed (by the subject whose states they are) through a sentence containing the first-person pronoun within the scope of an attitude verb. My belief that I am hungry is an example of an “I”-state. My belief that NN is hungry is not, even if I am NN. My desire that I be fed is an “I”-state. My desire that that man be fed is not an “I”-state, even if I am that man. By far the most popular approach to “I”-states is that pursued by Gareth Evans, Francois Recanati, and John Perry. All three focus on the idea that there is a distinctive relationship between “I”-states, on the one hand, and certain special ways of gaining information and/or certain special ways of acting on the other. The main challenge for anyone pursuing this kind of approach is just to say exactly what this distinctive relationship is. So far this challenge has not been met, despite several sustained attempts. There is however a very simple and powerful impetus behind the approach, which at least suggests that the challenge can be met: decent examples.

Example 1. A striking difference between the belief that I am in pain and the belief that NN is in pain is the difference in how each is related to information (even if I am NN). The former belief is sensitive to introspective information in a way that the latter is not. If I am receiving introspective information about my own pain then I can certainly be expected to form the belief that I am in pain. But I can be expected to form the belief that NN is in pain only if I know that I am NN. If I am suffering from amnesia and have forgotten my name, then information available through introspection is unlikely to cause me to form the belief that NN is in pain.

Example 2. Another striking example is Perry’s famous bear example¹: one difference between the belief that NN is being pursued by a hungry bear and the belief that I am

¹ See Perry(1979)

being pursued by a hungry bear is the difference in how each belief disposes me to act. If I have the second belief, and appropriate desires, I will try to flee the scene. If I only have the first belief then, even given the same desires, I will not try to flee the scene.

Perry used examples like these two to establish that indexicals like “I” are ‘essential’ in the sense that they can be used to express things which cannot be expressed without using them². But the examples are also suggestive about what it is that makes “I”-states distinctive. They do something to support the following hypothesis:

It is possible to state illuminating necessary and sufficient conditions for a state to be an “I”-state in terms of the relationship such states stands in to action and/or information (H*).

Evans, Recanati and Perry each try to do what H* says it is possible to do. Here is a brief position-statement from each of them.

Perry:

What is special about self-notions is that they are the normal repository of normally self-informative ways of perceiving, and the normal motivator of normally self-dependent ways of acting. (1998: 9)

Evans:

We clearly do have special ways of gaining knowledge of ourselves, and “I”-thoughts are thoughts which are controlled, or disposed to be controlled, by information gained in these ways. (1982: 253)

Recanati:

All egocentric thoughts may be said to involve perception in the sense at least that it is constitutive of such thoughts to be ‘controlled’ by the deliverances of the perceptual system *if there are any*. Pure egocentric thoughts are, as it were, counterfactually controlled by perception. (1993: 122)

I have introduced the notion of an “I”-state. Perry talks of self-notions. Evans talks of “I”-thoughts (and Recanati talks of egocentric thoughts). Nevertheless, I think that we are all addressing the same basic question. To see that this is so, we need some account of how the concepts of a state, a thought and a notion relate. Evans and Recanati use the term ‘thought’ to denote a Fregean proposition, a fine-grained entity which is composed of modes of proposition. Evans and Recanati would say that to be in a mental state is to stand in a relationship (e.g. the belief relationship, the desire relationship) to a thought. To be in an “I”-state is to stand in a relationship to a particular kind of thought– what Evans calls an “I”-thought and what Recanati calls an egocentric thought– which contains as a part the first person mode of presentation. On the neo-Russelian way of thinking

² See Perry (1979).

about mental states adopted by Perry, to be a mental state is to stand in a relationship to a coarse grained proposition under a mode of presentation (or notion). To be in an “I”-state is to stand in a relationship to a coarse-grained proposition under the first-person mode of presentation (or: under one’s self-notion).

I doubt that there are any substantive differences between the neo-Russellian and neo-Fregean ways of thinking of mental states which impinge on our topic. Evans, Recanati and Perry all agree that there are mental states which are ascribable through a sentence containing “I” and that what is common to all and only such states is that they involve the first person mode of presentation. Given that, to give an account of what all and only “I”-states involve just is to give an account of the first person mode of presentation. Similarly, if we go along with Evans and Recanati in supposing that there are “I”-thoughts (or egocentric thoughts), and that what all and only such thoughts have in common is that they contain the first person mode of presentation as a part, to give an account of what is common to all and only “I”-thoughts just is to give an account of the first person mode of presentation. In what follows, I shall sometimes speak of “I”-thoughts, and sometimes speak of self-notions, depending on which notion is being employed by the writer I am discussing. This is just a convenience though. It should be clear how everything I say is intended to contribute to an overall account of “I”-states.

Evans’s, Recanati’s and Perry’s accounts all fail. In section I, I’ll argue, in discussing Perry’s account, that there is no distinctive relationship between “I”-states and action. In section II, I’ll provide counterexamples to Evans’s and Recanati’s claims about what the distinctive relationship between “I”-states and information is. In section III, I’ll put forward my own account. The account builds on the work of Evans and Recanati, in so far as it gives certain ways of gaining information about oneself a crucial role in saying what “I”-states are. But, to avoid the objection which defeats their account, it is supplemented by an account of a relationship which holds *among* different “I”-states. Not much attention has been paid to this relationship. Evans, Recanati and Perry all fail to mention it. But it turns out that no adequate account can afford not to mention it.

A Relationship between “I”-states and Action? (I).

What consideration of examples like Perry’s bear case directly establish about the relationship between “I”-states and action is rather underwhelming. Consideration of that example establishes that it makes a difference to what I am disposed to do whether I believe that I am about to be attacked by a bear or whether I believe that NN is about to be attacked by a bear, even if I am NN. But to establish that much is not to establish any interesting generalization about the relationship between “I”-states and action. It is not to discern any pattern in the relationships that hold between individual “I”-states and action. John Perry makes a clear attempt to establish that there is such a pattern, and to say what it is, when he tells us that:

Self-notions are the normal motivator of normally self-dependent ways of acting.
(1998: 9)

For this claim to provide illumination about the self-notion it cannot be that the notion of a self-dependent way of acting itself needs to be explained in terms of that of the self-notion. This requirement does seem to be met. Perry elaborates a bit about what the normally self-dependent ways of acting he has in mind are. He says:

There are reflexive ways of acting. These are ways of bringing it about that someone has a property that each person can use to bring it about that he or she has a property, but cannot use to bring it about that others have it. Towards the end of the movie “Spellbound” Leo G. Carroll points his gun at Ingrid Bergman as she walks out the door of his office, having just disclosed that she knows that he framed Gregory Peck. We see this from Leo. G. Carroll’s perspective. Then we see the hand holding the gun turn slowly, until the barrel of the gun is all that is visible on the screen. Then it fires. We know what Carroll has done, and to whom. He has killed someone and the someone is Carroll. The way Carroll held and fired the gun is a normally self-effecting way of killing someone. (1998:11)

It is fairly clear that a way of acting is reflexive just in case it is normally self-dependent (e.g. turning inwards and firing is a reflexive way of killing because it is a way in which one kills which normally involves killing oneself) What exactly is the relationship between our self-notions and reflexive/normally self-dependent ways of acting supposed to be? All Perry tells us is that our self-notions are the normal motivator of reflexive/normally self-dependent ways of acting. It isn’t clear what this means. The most plausible and charitable interpretation of it is the following one:

One’s self-notion is the notion involved in states which are the normal causes of exercises of reflexive ways of acting.

It is mental states, or combinations of mental states, which cause exercises of particular ways of acting³. If there is a relationship between one’s self-notion and reflexive ways of acting then that must be because there is another, more direct, relationship between states that notion is involved in and reflexive ways of acting. If Perry’s claim that one’s self-notion is the normal motivator of reflexive ways of acting is to stand a chance of being true it must be regarded as abbreviating some claim about the relationship between “I”-states and reflexive ways of acting. I think it is most plausibly regarded as abbreviating the claim indented above and shall concentrate on undermining that claim. It ought to be clear though how other claims about the relationship between “I”-states and action could be undermined in a similar way.

The indented claim has certainly got something going for it. If I merely desire that NN be killed, but do not know that I am NN, it is hard to see how my desire could lead me to exercise the reflexive way of acting which Perry mentions: killing myself by turning my hand inwards and firing. In general, it is hard to see how I could be led to exercise a reflexive way of acting if not by states involving my self-notion. The only problem with

³E.g., a popular view, associated with Donald Davidson, is that every action is caused by a belief-desire pair. But the general claim is more obvious than Davidson’s specific version of it.

the indented claim is that this fact does not distinguish my self-notion from all other notions, as the following example brings out.

Suppose that I do not desire to be killed now but that there is a time at which I desire to be killed. The time now is t . So, either I desire that I be killed at some time other than t , or I desire that I be killed at t without knowing that it is now t . In this kind of case, my desire to be killed will not lead me to exercise my reflexive way of killing myself at t —since, as far as I am concerned, the moment is not yet ripe. Of course, if I desire to kill myself in 30 minutes time then that desire may lead me to exercise my reflexive way of killing myself in about 30 minutes time. But that is only because I have an approximate capacity to keep track of time and update my desires as time goes by. If, for whatever reason, I do not have, at $t + 30$ minutes, a desire I would then report with an utterance of ‘I desire to kill myself now’ I will not be led to exercise my reflexive way of acting at $t+30$ minutes. The general lesson this example illustrates is that any state which leads to an exercise of a reflexive way of acting will have to involve a now-notion as well as a self-notion. In that case, there is no one notion which is *the* notion which is involved in states which are the normal causes of exercises of reflexive ways of acting. One’s self-notion and one’s now-notion both meet this condition.

Many philosophers have emphasized the important role in explaining actions played by states one can express using indexicals like ‘I’ and ‘now’. Nothing in what I say requires me to dispute this general point. My observation is just that it is difficult to disentangle these roles so as to say something distinguishing about the relationship between one’s self-notion and action: something which is true of that relationship but not, for example, equally true of the relationship between one’s now-notion and action. Perry’s attempt to do this appears to fail. It does not follow that no one else’s will succeed, but it is worth pointing out that Perry is the person who has done more research into the connection between “I”-states and action than anyone else. I think we should tentatively accept that there is no relationship to action, or to ways of acting, in which all and only states involving one’s self-notion stands. If we are still interested in saying something general about “I”-states, we should change tack and focus on the task of articulating the connection between “I”-states and information. In the next section, I do that.

Connecting “I”-states and Information (II).

Consider again the two quotes from Evans and Recanati:

We clearly do have special ways of gaining knowledge of ourselves, and “I”-thoughts are thoughts which are controlled, or disposed to be controlled, by information gained in these ways. (1982: 253)

All egocentric thoughts may be said to involve perception in the sense at least that it is constitutive of such thoughts to be ‘controlled’ by the deliverances of the perceptual system *if there are any*. Pure egocentric thoughts are, as it were, counterfactually controlled by perception. (1993: 122)

Both quotes are a bit opaque. I will pay some attention to finding the most plausible and charitable interpretation of them. The reason for doing this is not that there is a charitable interpretation of the quotes on which they express a true theory of “I”-states. There is no such interpretation. The reason is that some of notions appealed to in providing a charitable interpretation of Evans’s and Recanati’s quotes will figure in my own positive account of the relationship between “I”-states and information. To that extent, my account draws on, and corrects, theirs.

It is a little odd to talk, as Evans and Recanati both do, about *thoughts* being controlled by information. The relationship of being controlled by would seem to be a causal relationship. But what Evans and Recanati calls ‘thoughts’ are abstract entities- Fregean propositions. Because thoughts are abstract entities they cannot themselves enter into causal relationships. Presumably Evans’s and Recanati idea is that thoughts can be controlled by information in a derivative sense. I think they are most charitably interpreted as thinking that a thought is controlled by information from a particular source just in case one’s *judgments* of that thought are controlled by information received via that source⁴.

Neither Evans nor Recanati is explicit about what it takes for a judgment to be controlled by, or disposed to be controlled by, information received from a particular source. The basic idea seems to be that ‘being controlled by, or disposed to be controlled by’ denotes a rather strong kind of causal relationship. For example, Evans and Recanati would say that the relationship holds between my judgment that I am in pain and information I can receive from introspection. It also holds between my judgment that I am in front of a tree and information I can receive from vision. But it does not hold between my judgment that NN is in front of a tree and information I receive from vision. The way of explaining what the relevant relationship is which makes most sense of what Evans and Recanati say invokes the notion of taking an informational state at face value. That notion is itself philosophically controversial. Many philosophers try to analyze it in other terms and, among those who do, there is no general agreement about which analysis is correct⁵. But it does seem to be a notion on which we have an intuitive handle– that, after all is one of the main reasons philosophers are interested in discussing it. I propose to take it for granted here and to use it explain the notion of ‘being controlled by, or being disposed to be controlled by, information’. Introspection can provide me with information which, if I take it at face value, will lead me to judge that I am in pain. But introspection cannot provide me with information which, if I take it at face value, will lead me to judge that NN is in pain. Introspection can lead me some of the way to judging that NN is in pain. But to go the whole way I need to know that I am NN, and that I am NN is not something I learn via introspection. My suggestion is that we read Evans’s and Recanati’s claim that a thought is controlled, or disposed to be controlled, by a given way of gaining

⁴ Perhaps ‘judgment’ exhibits the same act/object ambiguity as does ‘thought’. In this paper, ‘judgment’ always refers to the act of judging, not to the object judged in such an act. E.g. ‘The judgment that p’ refers to the judging that p, not to p itself. By contrast, ‘thought’ always refers to the object of the thought. ‘The thought that p’ refers to p itself, not to the thinking that p.

⁵ See, e.g., Siegel (2006).

information, as the claim that that way of gaining information can provide one with information which, if one takes it at face value, will lead one to judge that thought.⁶

We can say with reasonable confidence that there is something distinctive about the relationship to information of the judgment that I am in pain— something which distinguishes it, for example, from the judgment that NN is in pain. But if we want to say something general about the relationship between “I”-states and information we will have to go beyond particular examples. I read Evans and Recanati as doing this by saying (in the quotes above) that there is a class of ways of gaining information such that all and only “I”-judgments are controlled, or disposed to be controlled, by the information those ways of gaining information provide. It isn’t clear what the criterion for membership in the class of ways of gaining information is. Evans talks about ‘special’ ways of gaining information. Recanati talks about ‘perceptual’ ways of gaining information. Before saying what I take the interesting class of ways of gaining information in the area to be, let me say the kind of claim Evans’s and Recanati’s make seems far too strong.

The Overgeneralization Objection

Evans’s and Recanati’s account presupposes that for every “I”-thought I can think I will have some ‘special’/ ‘perceptual’ way of gaining information which controls, or is disposed to control, my judgments of that thought. But, however exactly ‘special’/ ‘perceptual’ is cashed out, this is a gross overgeneralization. Consider my judgment that I shall die in Havana. There just isn’t any way of gaining information which can provide me with information which, if I take it at face value, will lead me to judge that I shall die in Havana. A fortiori, there isn’t any ‘special’/ ‘perceptual’ way of gaining information which can provide me with information which, if I take it face value, will lead me to judge that I shall die in Havana. Of course, information can have an impact on whether or not I form the judgment that I shall die in Havana. I might for example arrive at the negation of that judgment by performing the following inference:

Nobody who believes that Castro is a bit of an old codger will be let into Cuba
(background belief)

I believe that Castro is a bit of an old codger (introspection)

So, I shall not be let into Cuba.

So, I shall not die in Havana.

Here, introspective information is causing me to judge that I believe that Castro is a bit of an old codger and that judgment, in combination with other judgments, leads me to judge that I shall not die in Havana. But there is no plausibility to the claim that, in judging that I shall not die in Havana in this kind of case, I am simply taking the information introspection provides me with at face value.

Evans or Recanati could offer a more liberal understanding of what it takes for information to control a judgment, or to be disposed to control it, than the one I have

⁶ Evans’s claim mentions a disposition. My formulation does not. The word ‘can’ in my formulation is doing the same job as the mention of the disposition does in Evans’s.

been canvassing on their behalf. But, if they do that, the other direction of their biconditional will be threatened. It will no longer be plausible that *only* “I”-thoughts count as controlled, or disposed to be controlled, by special ways of gaining information. Intuitively, the relationship between introspection and my judgment that I shall not die in Havana in the case just described is no tighter than is the relationship between introspection and my judgment that NN is in pain (in the case in which I arrive at that judgment by using introspection to establish that I am in pain and then rely on my knowledge that I am NN to conclude that NN is in pain). In each case, the connection between information and the final judgment is mediated by extra premises. But we do not want our theory of “I”-states to count my judgment that NN is in pain as an “I”-state.

It seems doubtful that there is any class of ways of gaining information such that all and only “I”-thoughts will be sensitive to information received via some member of that class. The background point is that how sensitive a thought is to information depends not just on its singular component, but also on its predicative component. In the case of many “I”-thoughts, the predicative component will be one whose instantiation one cannot establish via special ways, or perceptual ways, or possibly any ways, of gaining information. The “I”-thought whose predicative component is expressed by ‘shall die in Havana’ is one example, but it is easy to think of many others.

A Relationship Among “I”-states (III)

The core insight which we can take from Evans is that it is a distinguishing property of *some* “I”-judgments— e.g. ‘I am in pain’, ‘I am in front of a tree’— that they are sensitive to certain ways one has of gaining information. The challenge is to exploit this insight in a general account of “I”-states while avoiding the kind of overgeneralization Evans’s own account involves. My way of meeting this challenge appeals to a relationship (which, for reasons which will become apparent, I label the relationship of rational integration) which holds *among* “I”-states rather than between “I”-states and something else (e.g. action, information).

Here, first, is my own account of what we should say the defining property of the class of ways of gaining information a theory of “I”-states needs to appeal to is.

A way of gaining information, *w*, is reflexive just in case, for all subjects *s*, whenever *s* uses *w* to gain information *s* gains information about *s*, and only about *s*.

Introspection is a reflexive way of gaining information in this sense. So too are one’s various proprioceptive ways of gaining information about oneself. My judgment that I am in pain is sensitive to a reflexive way of gaining information- introspection. My judgment that my knees are crossed is also sensitive to a reflexive way of gaining information- proprioception or, perhaps, the particular proprioceptive way of gaining information which provides one with information about one’s body’s orientation. The relevant notion of sensitivity is cashed out in terms of the notion of taking an informational state at face value. My judgment that my knees are crossed is sensitive to proprioception in the strong

sense that proprioception can provide me with information which, if I take it at face value, will lead me to judge that my knees are crossed. By contrast, there is no reflexive way of gaining information, and possibly no way of gaining information at all, to which my judgment that I shall die in Havana is sensitive in this strong sense.

To begin seeing what relationship the rational integration is, and how appealing to it helps consider the following two inferences:

I shall die in Havana
I am in pain

Someone who is in pain will die in Havana.

I shall die in Havana.
I am hot.

Someone who is hot will die in Havana.

Intuitively, each of these inferences is one the subject of the inference is perfectly entitled to make. We can exploit this fact in saying what the relationship of rational integration is. In the case of each inference, the subject treats his two judgments as concerning the same objects. After all, if the two judgments do not concern the same object then they do nothing to support the conclusion which the subject draws. Moreover, since each inference is one he is entitled to, and since the inference involves treating the two judgments as concerning the same object, it follows that the subject must be entitled to treat the two judgments as concerning the same object. We can record the fact that neither inference requires an identity judgment by saying that the subject is *automatically* entitled to treat his judgments as concerning the same object⁷. We now have all the materials necessary to introduce the relationship of rational integration.

Two states are rationally integrated just in case one is automatically entitled, in one's reasoning, to treat both as concerning the same object.

With the notion of rational integration in place we can provide the following theory of "I"-states:

A state is an "I"-state just in case it is rationally integrated with some state which is sensitive to a reflexive way of gaining information.

A judgment like the judgment that I am in pain is sensitive to a reflexive way of gaining information. It counts as an "I"-state in virtue of being rationally integrated with itself. We know it is rationally integrated with itself because the inference

I am in pain

⁷ See Campbell(1994) for discussion of this point.

I am in pain

though not exactly brilliant, and dismally circular, is one which the subject of the inference is perfectly entitled to perform. Since it is also an inference which involves treating the premise and the conclusion as concerning the same object (if the premise and conclusion did not concern the same object the premise would do nothing to support the conclusion) we can conclude that the judgment that I am in pain is rationally integrated with itself.

A judgment like the judgment that I shall die in Havana counts as an “I”-state in virtue of being rationally integrated with states other than itself which are sensitive to reflexive ways of gaining information. For example, the permissibility of the two inferences involving it we looked at above reveal that it is rationally integrated with the judgment that I am in pain and it is also rationally integrated with the judgment that I am hot.

Conclusion

The class of judgments which are sensitive to reflexive ways of gaining information play a special role in my account. One can defend an account of “I”-states which gives “I”-states which fall into this class a special role without losing sight of the fact (as Evans and Recanati do) that “I”-states which fall into this class are the exception rather than the rule.

My account does leave one important question one might have about the first person unanswered: why is it that “I”-states- states ascribable using a particular word- stand in the distinctive relationship to information in which (I claim) they do stand? However, any attempt to answer this kind of question is very unlikely to succeed unless one has a correct account of what the distinctive relationship between “I”-states and information is. (And, as we have seen in our discussion of Evans and Recanati, it is not a trivial undertaking to give the correct account). In that case, anyone interested in addressing the question I leave unaddressed here ought to be interested in first knowing the right answer to the question I have addressed.

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