

## [1] THE FIRST PERSON Anthony Kenny

As a graduate student at St Benet's Hall, Oxford, from 1957-1959 I attended the classes on Wittgenstein given by Elizabeth Anscombe in a chilly and dilapidated outhouse of Somerville College. I look back on those classes as the most exciting and significant event in my education in philosophy. Like many others, when I came to the classes I regarded Wittgenstein's attack on private languages with incomprehension mixed with hostility. Miss Anscombe encouraged us to give the fullest possible expression to our doubts and disagreements: from time to time I found myself thrust into the uncomfortable position of spokesman for the pro-private-language party. By the end of the term I had become convinced of the correctness, and the profound importance, of the insights expressed by Wittgenstein in his critique of private ostensive definition. The seminar completely changed the way in which I looked at issues in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind: various lines of thought which until that time I had found seductive, and which many others still follow enthusiastically, lost all their attraction and were revealed as blind alleys and dead ends. The lines of thought ramified over all areas of philosophy, but all of them can broadly be termed Cartesian.

One thing which I learned from reading Wittgenstein with Miss Anscombe was to have an enormous respect for the genius of Descartes. Those who accept a Cartesian view of the mind, I suppose, can admire Descartes for being the first to state certain truths with cogency and elegance and concision. But only one who is cured of Cartesianism can fully be awed by the breathtaking power of an intellect which could propagate, almost unaided, a myth which to this day has such a comprehensive grasp on the imagination of a large part of the human race. To those who doubt the power of Cartesian ideas to survive and flourish in the most hostile of climates, I commend a reading of Professor Anscombe's paper 'The first person'.<sup>1</sup>

Professor Anscombe's paper takes its start from Descartes' argument to prove that he is not a body. The argument, she observes, is essentially a first-person one, which each of us must go through for himself. The conclusion of the Cartesian doubt could as well have been 'I am not Descartes' as 'I am not a body'. Descartes might have concluded to the non-identity of himself with Descartes. This is not the self-contradiction that it seems, because the 'himself' here is not a pronoun replaceable by 'Descartes': it is the indirect reflexive, which has to be explained in terms of 'I'.

We cannot explain 'I' by saying that it is the word each of us uses to refer to himself. If the 'himself' here is the ordinary reflexive pronoun, then the specification is inadequate: one can refer to oneself without knowing one is doing so, and in general knowledge of the referent of a referring expression does not amount to knowledge of its sense. If the 'himself' is the indirect reflexive then the account is circular since the indirect reflexive is simply the *oratio obliqua* version of the *oratio recta* 'I'.

'I' is not a proper name. This is not because it is a name which everyone has: that would be perfectly conceivable. Nor is it because it is a name that everyone uses only to speak of himself. Such a situation too would be imaginable: suppose everyone had '*A*' marked on his wrist, and one of the letters '*B*' to '*Z*' marked on his back; it might be that everyone reported on himself by using '*A*' and on others by using '*B*' to '*Z*'—that would still not make '*A*' like our 'I' unless it was, like 'I', a manifestation of self-consciousness.

What is self-consciousness? Is it a consciousness of a self, a self being something that some things have or are? If so, then we might conceive 'I' as the name of a self, and an account of what kind of thing a self was would clarify the use of 'I' in the way that an account of what a city is could communicate part of what is needed to understand the use of a name like 'London'. But self-consciousness, Professor Anscombe argues, is not consciousness of a self; it is simply consciousness that such-and-such holds of oneself, where 'oneself' is again the indirect reflexive. The very notion of a self is begotten of a misconstrual of this pronoun.

If 'I' is not a proper name shall we simply say then that it is a pronoun? The grammatical category of pronouns is a ragbag.

including even variables; and the suggestion given by the word's etymology, that it can be replaced by a noun in a sentence while preserving the sense of the sentence, is false of 'I'. Shall we say that 'I' is a demonstrative? If we use a demonstrative like '*this*' we must be prepared to answer the question '*this what?*'; it is not clear what the corresponding question and answer is with 'I'. Moreover, a demonstrative like '*this*' may fail to have a reference (for example if I say '*this* parcel of ashes' pointing to what, unknown to me, is an empty box); no such failure of reference is possible, it seems, if we use 'I' to refer.

In fact, Professor Anscombe insists, 'I' is neither a name nor any other kind of expression whose logical role is to make a reference at all. Of course, it is true that if *X* makes assertions with 'I' as grammatical subject, then those assertions will be true if and only if what he asserts is true of *X*. But this doesn't mean that 'I' refers to *X*, for the truth-condition of the whole sentence does not determine the meaning of the items within the sentence. One who hears or reads a statement with 'I' as subject needs to know whose statement it is if he wants to know how to verify it. But that does not make 'I' a referring expression, any more than the '-o' at the end of a Latin verb such as '*ambulo*', which signifies the same requirement.

If 'I' were a referring expression at all, it would seem to be one whose reference is guaranteed in the sense that the object an 'I'-user means by it must exist so long as he is using 'I', and in the sense that he cannot take the wrong object to be the object he means by 'I'. The only thing thus guaranteed is indeed the Cartesian Ego: certainly not the body.

Imagine that I get into a state of 'sensory deprivation'. Sight is cut off, and I am locally anaesthetized everywhere, perhaps floated in a tank of tepid water; I am unable to speak, or to touch any part of my body with any other. Now I tell myself "I won't let this happen again!" If the object meant by 'I' is this body, this human being, then in these circumstances it won't be present to my senses; and how else can it be 'present to' me? But have I lost what I mean by 'I'? Is that not present to me? Am I reduced to, as it were, 'referring in absence'? I have not lost my 'self-consciousness'; nor can what I mean by 'I' be an object no longer present to me.

Thus if 'I' is a referring expression, Descartes was right about

its referent: though his position runs into intolerable difficulties about the reidentification of the Ego from thought to thought.

The only way to avoid the Cartesian blind alley, Professor Anscombe maintains, is to break altogether with the idea that 'I' refers at all. If we give up this idea, we must also recognize that 'I am N.N.' is not an identity proposition. 'N.N. is this thing here'—'N.N. is this body'—'N.N. is this living human being': these are all identity propositions. But to get from them to 'I am N.N.' we need the proposition 'I am this thing here'—and this is not an identity proposition.

The kernel of Anscombe's positive account is given in these paragraphs:

"I am this thing here" is, then, a real proposition, but not a proposition of identity. It means: this thing here is the thing, the person (in the offences against the person's sense) of whose action *this* idea of action is an idea, of whose movements *these* ideas of movement are ideas, of whose posture *this* idea of posture is the idea. And also, of which *these* intended actions, if carried out, will be the actions.

If I were in that condition of 'sensory deprivation', I could not have the thought "this object", "this body"—there would be nothing for "this" to latch on to. But that is not to say I could not still have the ideas of actions, motion, etc. For these ideas are not extracts from sensory observation. If I do have them under sensory deprivation, I shall perhaps *believe* that there is such a body. But the possibility will perhaps strike me that there is none. That is, the possibility that there is then nothing that I am.

If "I" were a name, it would have to be a name for something with this sort of connection with this body, not an extra-ordinary name for this body. Not a name for this body because sensory deprivation and even loss of consciousness of posture, etc., is not loss of *I*. (That, at least, is how one would have to put it, treating "I" as a name.)

But "I" is not a name: these I-thoughts are examples of reflective consciousness of states, actions, motions, etc., not of an object I mean by "I", but of this body. These I-thoughts (allow me to pause and think some!)... are unmediated conceptions (knowledge or belief, true or false) of states, motions, etc., of this object here, about which I can find out (if I don't know it) that it is E.A. About which I did learn that it is a human being.

Most people with whom I have discussed this article find its destructive arguments unconvincing and its negative conclusion preposterous. For myself, I am wholly persuaded that 'I' is not a referring expression, and that 'I am N.N.' is not an

identity proposition. I accept that 'the self' is a piece of philosophers' nonsense produced by misunderstanding of the reflexive pronoun—to ask what kind of substance my *self* is is like asking what the characteristic of *ownness* is which my own property has in addition to its being *mine*. I accept that a person is a living human being, and that I am such a person and not a Cartesian ego, a Lockean self, or an Aristotelian soul. None the less, I find Anscombe's positive account of 'I' unacceptable. Astonishingly, it seems to me, she falls into the Cartesian trap from which Wittgenstein showed us the way out.

Consider the sentence 'This body is the person of whose action *this* idea of action is an idea'. What is *this* idea of action? As Professor Anscombe uttered these words in her lecture, perhaps she had a mental image of herself waving an arm, or had the thought 'I will wave my arm'. This kind of thing, no doubt, is what she was referring to by the expression 'idea of action'. But what is the role of the demonstrative *this*? It was not meant to single out one idea of action from among other items in her mental history: it was not meant to contrast, say, the idea of waving an arm with the idea of putting the left foot forward. 'This', in her mouth, in that context, was simply tantamount to 'my'. It was not, of course, an invitation to her hearers to inspect her mental images or to fix their attention on her secret thoughts. But since it was not that, could the remark give her hearers any information at all? To say 'My body is the body of whose action my idea of action is an idea' is not to say anything that could possibly be false; and 'this body is my body' is equally truisitic if 'this body' means 'the body uttering this sentence'. We individuate people's ideas of action by individuating the bodies that give them expression. When we in the audience listened to Professor Anscombe's sentence we did not first locate the idea of action, and then identify the body meant by 'this body' and finally grasp the relation intended between the two. We were inclined to assent to what was said simply because the same body, the same person, was speaking throughout the sentence.

But did not Professor Anscombe make clear to herself what she meant by 'this idea of action' and do so independently of the truth of the 'real proposition' which she expressed by saying 'I am this thing here'? Could she then have been in

doubt of, or ignorant of, which idea of action was meant, and did the mental attention accompanying 'this' remove or prevent the doubt? It is here that Wittgenstein's critique of the notion of private ostensive definition becomes relevant. 'This idea of action' is not, of course, the expression of an attempt at private ostensive definition: it is not meant to give sense to the expression 'idea of action', but only to indicate its reference. And Wittgenstein's target was the idea of private sense, not of private reference; nothing in what he says rules out the possibility of referring to our own and others' secret thoughts. But if Wittgenstein is right, any private ostension or demonstration must be something which it would make sense to think of as being done publicly: one can refer, for instance, to the content of a dream or mental image because one could exhibit it by narrating or drawing it. But when the 'this' in 'this idea of action' is meant to mean 'mine, not someone else's', there does not seem to be anything that could be a public performance of this private demonstration without being at the same time a pointing to *this body*. Hence it seems that 'this body is the body these ideas are about' cannot be a 'genuine proposition' if that means a proposition that could be used to convey information.

But even in the public case, it may be said, the body that gives expression to an idea of action need not be the body that enters into the content of the idea. When X says to Z through an interpreter Y 'I will meet you at the airport at 10.30' it is Y's body that produces the sounds, X's body that verifies or falsifies the pronouncement. But this does not drive a wedge between the individuation of the idea of action and the individuation of its content: it merely shows that the notion of 'expression' is not a simple one. In such a case, the idea of action is not Y's idea any more than its fulfillment is: when we look for the verifier or falsifier of 'I'-sentences we have to look for the primary utterer of the sentence and not secondary utterers such as interpreters, telephones, or tape-recorders. We individuate the idea of action by individuating the primary utterer; and we discover that X is the primary utterer in such a case by discovering, *inter alia*, the sounds made by X's body within the range of detection of the secondary utterer. If an interpreter relayed Anscombe's lecture to a foreign audience,

the expression 'this idea of action' and the expression 'this body' would refer to Anscombe's idea and Anscombe's body, not to the interpreter's.

But are there not cases where speakers disown the sounds coming out of their mouths, without there being any other person or body which can be identified as the primary utterer? Professor Anscombe reminds us of the utterances of mediums and of those who believe themselves possessed by spirits. She invites us to consider the situation in which someone stands before us and says 'Try to believe this: 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 him'. Does not a consideration of such cases show that 'I am this thing here' is a genuine proposition, which could serve to convey the information that the listener is *not* face to face with a case of possession or communication through a medium?

We should observe first that the possibility of 'I'-utterances being given a verification by something other than the utterer does not by itself suffice to give content to the notion of control by spirits. Suppose that a sybil in a trance says 'I will destroy Jerusalem on Christmas Day 1984'; and suppose that on Christmas Day 1984 Jerusalem is ravaged by an earthquake or sacked by an army out of control. This, by itself, does not enable us to answer, or even coherently to raise, the question 'And who was the "I" who made the prediction? Consider the clause in Anscombe's imagined utterance 'When I say "I" . . .'. We can only make something of this because we tacitly accept the first 'I' as standing at least temporarily in the normal relation to the human being who utters it: if we set ourselves to obey the spirit's instructions, it will be the next 'I's uttered by *the same human being* that we will respectfully attend to.

But perhaps Professor Anscombe's logical point can be made without introducing the difficult notion of spiritual agency. Imagine two Siamese twins related in the following way: whenever the mouth of Tweedledum says 'I will do X', the body of Tweedledee does X, and vice versa; and whenever something happens to the body of Tweedledee it is reported in the first person by Tweedledum. Do we not now have a case where the body which owns an 'I'-idea is distinct from the body

which provides its subject matter? Cannot either twin say 'I am not *this* body, I am *that* body'? And so have we not a conceivable situation which might be ruled out by the 'genuine proposition' 'I am this body here'?

Nothing in the situation, it seems, *compels* us to say that the body which utters 'I' is not the body which the 'I'-utterances are about. No doubt there is little to attract us in the suggestion that perhaps the 'I'-utterances are about the uttering body, but are just all false—though the body which the 'I'-utterances are about is of course the one which verifies *or falsifies* them. But might not one say that what we have here is a pair of bodies of unusual shapes, with the mouth, instead of being central, being, as it were, an offshore island?

But even if we do say that Tweedledum's mouth utters 'I'-sentences which are about Tweedledee's body we cannot, it seems, take these 'I'-sentences to be expressions of self-consciousness in the way that normal 'I'-sentences are. For let us suppose that Tweedledum has a thought about himself which he wishes to communicate to others: suppose, for instance, he has the thought 'I will tell Professor Anscombe about my pitiable condition'. How is he to carry out this resolve? Which mouth will he use to express the thought 'I am not this body'? If he uses Tweedledee's mouth, then that mouth will say 'I am not this body'. But *that*, if it communicates information at all, communicates information about Tweedledee, not about Tweedledum. If Tweedledum uses his own mouth to express the information, then it is not the case that the 'I'-ideas of Tweedledum are always ideas of the action of Tweedledee's body. We can preserve our fiction from collapsing only if we forget that the expression of a thought by uttering it is as much the enactment of an idea as any other bodily movement. If we exclude the expressive function of 'I'-utterances, then the 'I'-utterances of the twins resemble rather the '*A*'-utterances imagined by Professor Anscombe than the 'I'-utterances of self-conscious persons.

Such fantasies, and the phenomena of possession, may throw into confusion the sense of 'I' emerging from a human mouth. They cannot create a sense of 'I' in which, instead of expressing the self-consciousness of the body to which the mouth belongs, it serves to express the self-consciousness of

some other agent. Someone believing himself possessed may of course say 'It was not I who uttered those terrible blasphemies a moment ago'. He is not denying that it was his body that made the noises: and we can make sense of his claim. Not every movement that a person's body makes is a bodily movement of that person: but that does not mean that there can be bodily movements of a person which are not movements of that person's body. For a movement of *X*'s body to be a movement made by *X* it must be a voluntary movement: and the blasphemies of the possessed, we may believe, are not voluntary actions of theirs. But in all this it is the 'I' of the unfortunate person possessed that we can understand, not the 'I' of a possessor.

Let us turn from possession to sensory deprivation. Does the consideration of this enable us to sever the 'I'-thoughts from the body which verifies or falsifies them? Professor Anscombe seems to suggest that in a state of sensory deprivation I can think, and privately concentrate on, 'I'-thoughts (for example 'I won't let this happen again') without knowing which body they concern, and indeed without knowing whether I have a body at all. But if these thoughts have a sense, the sense must surely be expressible; and what they say could only be said publicly if it were said by the right body. Indeed, if I can be said to be in doubt whether I have a body, then the sense of 'I won't let this happen again' must surely be in question. Such a resolve, or plan of action, is a plan *for a body*. The resolve is not like 'I will drive my car home now' said when I do not know that my car has been stolen. 'I will drive my car home, if I still have a car' makes sense; but 'I will get out of this bath, if I still have a body' does not. For if I no longer have a body, then I no longer exist, as Professor Anscombe explicitly concedes. And if I do not exist, then I cannot be making resolves either. Following the path of Cartesian doubt seems to lead to a very unCartesian thought: 'Perhaps I don't exist, but if I do exist, I'll never let this happen again'.

Thoughts may be kept to oneself; but even the most secret thought must be capable of being made public, and the sense of the thought expressed in public must be the same as the sense of the thought entertained in private—otherwise we could not speak of the 'expressor' of the thought. Professor Anscombe

has argued convincingly that 'I' is not a word whose function is to *refer* to its utterer. But it is part of the *sense* of 'I' that assertions containing it are verified or falsified by reference to the history of the asserter. That is something that you know by knowing the grammar of the word, not something you know as a result of study of the context of a particular utterance. A public utterance of an 'I'-sentence has a clear sense only when it is clear which is the body, the person, that utters it as its primary utterer. What goes for the public utterance must go for the private thought too, if Wittgenstein is right that there is no such thing as private sense.

Of course, in a normal case, where there is no sensory deprivation, there may be genuine questions of the form 'Is this body my body?' I may see a body in a mirror, or glimpse part of a trouser leg under the table, for instance, and raise the question. But when these questions are answered, the uncertainty that is removed is an uncertainty about which body *this* is, not an uncertainty about which body *mine* is. In the case of sensory deprivation I cannot have thoughts of the form 'this body is my body', for there is nothing for the 'this' to latch on to, no glimpse or sound or sensation. But what sensory deprivation cuts me off from is the reference of 'this', not the sense of 'my'. It is not as if there is an enterprise of identifying my own body, which I can do in the normal case and fail to do in the case of sensory deprivation. In calling a body 'my body' I do not identify the body, either for myself or for anyone else; though, for others, I may thereby identify myself.

In the normal case, it is not by sensory experience that I know I have a body; the lack of sensory experience therefore does not prevent me knowing I have a body, and does not prevent my 'I'-thoughts from being about that body. If it did render it uncertain whether I had a body it would, for the reasons given, render unclear the sense of the 'I' in the 'I'-thoughts. Once again, the attempt to provide a contrast to give content to the utterance 'I am this body' fails. 'I am this body' can be given a sense in particular circumstances, as when pointing to a photograph or a mirror; it does not have a general sense as expressing a truth which each of us knows about himself but cannot communicate to others.

The conclusion of Professor Anscombe's article seemed to

be this. 'I am the thinker of these thoughts' is not a genuine proposition, but 'I am this body' is a real proposition which answers a real question. This conclusion I found surprisingly un-Wittgensteinian: the thinker of these thoughts who is possibly not this person with this body seems uncomfortably similar to a Cartesian ego; and if we allow the conceivability of the notion that we are thus spiritual, it seems no great matter that when we use 'I' we are not actually *referring* to any such spirit or self. I have argued that neither consideration of the role of interpreters, nor reflection on the phenomena of possession, nor imagination of a state of sensory deprivation give reason for thinking that content can be given to 'I'-thoughts where there is no person identifiable as an actual or possible utterer of the thoughts. We cannot drive a wedge between the body that expresses a first-person idea of action, and the body that is the subject-matter of the idea of action, because it is part of the sense of 'I' that utterer and subject should be one and the same. Any circumstances which would imagine which would suggest a divorce between the two would to the same extent call in question the sense of the 'I' in the 'I'-thoughts.

The arguments I have used in this paper are all derived from principles made familiar by Wittgenstein's critique of private ostensive definition: principles I first came to appreciate at those classes in Somerville some twenty years ago. It may be that I have misunderstood Professor Anscombe's article: I am not sure that I have understood it correctly, but perhaps my expression of my interpretation of it may help others to see it in a clearer light. Whether or not the objections which I have made to it stand up, the article seems to me to be of great interest—an interest which is independent of the question whether it marks the conversion of Professor Anscombe from Wittgenstein to Descartes.

#### Note

1 G. E. M. Anscombe, 'The first person', in *Mind and Language*, ed. S. Guttenplan (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975), pp. 45-66.