Wittgenstein’s “The First Person” and Two-Dimensional Semantics

ABSTRACT This essay takes as its central problem Wittgenstein’s comments in his Blue and Brown Books on the first person pronoun, ‘I’, in particular those which express his rejection of the notion that ‘I’ is a referring term. Through close analysis of his distinction between ‘I’ used as subject and ‘I’ used as object, the root cause of this rejection is traced – despite his claim that the meaning of a word is constituted by its use – to his continued espousal of ‘ostensive definition’ (i.e. an external reference-relation between word and object; a “pointing to something”) as the only manner in which the meaning of the word is fixed. In order to clarify where the points of confusion in Wittgenstein’s distinction are and why ‘I’ may still be considered to be a referring term, an alternative model of meaning and reference is suggested: David Chalmers’ two-dimensional semantics, with special emphasis on the distinction between the epistemic and the subjunctive intension/content (i.e. meaning) of a word. Through this, it becomes clear that we can interpret Wittgenstein’s doubts about whether ‘I’ is a referring term, as resulting from mixing the two different perspectives from which epistemic and subjunctive content arise.

Wittgenstein’s musings on the use of the first person pronoun ‘I’ in the Blue and Brown Books offer a puzzle, or more precisely a series of puzzles, to the reader. In attempting to pin down the meaning of the word ‘I’, Wittgenstein comes to the conclusion that it is an illusion that ‘I’ has an invariant meaning across all contexts in which it is used. Furthermore, any explanation of the meaning of ‘I’ as referring to, in the sense of “picking out”, a person would seem not to account adequately for these various uses. As Hacker states, “the use of I does not converge on this paradigm of reference.”¹ Hence, Wittgenstein can be seen as “assembling an ‘album’, a mosaic”² of the various uses of the ‘I’ and closing off with an “anti-reductionist No”³ all attempts to find an underlying unity to these uses, thereby denying that the first person pronoun has an invariant, unitary meaning. In his words, “the use of the word in practice is its meaning.”⁴ This paper is an attempt to pull back from the individual leaves of the album or the tiles of the mosaic, in order to see whether they do not form part of a greater story or image. I believe that the key to unifying these disparate and seemingly incommensurate uses of ‘I’ and finding its unitary meaning, in short to solving Wittgenstein’s puzzles of the first person, may be sought in a more recent theory of

³ Hagberg, 110.
meaning: David Chalmers’ two-dimensional semantics.\(^5\) To this end, in the first section, I will provide an overview of Wittgenstein’s puzzles concerning the first person. In the second section, the most relevant aspects of Chalmers’ two-dimensional semantics will be explained, along with an account of how it might be used in solving the puzzles of the first person. Through this, I hope to show that the reason behind Wittgenstein’s puzzlement at our uses of the first person can be found in his ostensive theory of meaning (i.e. that the definition or meaning of a word is determined by indicating the object in the world to which it refers)\(^6\) and furthermore, that Chalmers’ alternative model of meaning enables us to establish a referential relation between word and object which reveals the unified ‘bigger picture’ of the uses and the meaning of the first person pronoun, ‘I’.

§1: The First Person

Wittgenstein, in “The First Person”\(^7\), aims to debunk the myth that ‘I’ is invariably used as a referring term which picks out a particular person among others and that its meaning is determined by this referential function. Even though, as we have seen, Wittgenstein has stated outright that the particular uses of words, rather than the word itself, determine their meaning it is clear that he has not fully broken with the ostensive theory of meaning: comparing the meaning of ‘I’ with labels (which of course pick out something by naming it), he states that “what makes these labels important is their use.”\(^8\) Wittgenstein goes on to distinguish between the use (and thus the meaning) of ‘I’ as a subject and as an object. Under ‘I’-as-subject, he cites examples such as ‘I am in pain’ or ‘I have a toothache’ and under ‘I’-as-object, examples such as ‘I have grown six inches’ and ‘I have a bump on my forehead’. With regard to the use of ‘I’ as object, he states that “the possibility of error has been provided for.”\(^9\) That is, I might see a bump on a forehead or a broken arm in a mirror and mistake it for mine when in fact, it belongs to someone else. In the case of ‘I’-as-subject,

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\(^8\) Ibid., 191.

\(^9\) Ibid., 189.
there is no such possibility for error through misidentification. This is evidenced by the fact that it would be nonsensical for someone to say ‘I am in pain’ and then for us to ask that person, “are you sure that it’s you who has pains?” As Hacker states, this leads Wittgenstein to the conclusion that ‘I’-as-subject is not a referring expression at all; that “[w]hen I use the first person pronoun, I use no principle of differentiation to select one person from among others.” In Wittgenstein’s own words, unlike the case of ‘I’-as-object, ‘I’-as-subject is not used as a “demonstrative pronoun [...] by ‘I’, I don’t wish to pick out one person (from amongst different persons).”

Wittgenstein gives an example from geometry to explain the distinction between the demonstrative and non-demonstrative use of a pronoun, as well as the connection between the idea that ‘I’-as-subject is immune to (referential) error through misidentification and that it is therefore not in any way a referring term.

According to the standard idea that ‘I’ is demonstrative pronoun (like ‘he’ or ‘this person’) in all contexts of use, the analogy to be drawn with this triangle would be the identity which is established through correspondence between α and α’ or β and β’: within each pair, each symbol refers to its counterpart. However, the use of ‘I’ as subject (i.e. as non-demonstrative) is much more like the identity between γ and γ which is, as he states, “of an entirely different kind” than the previous one. As we can clearly see, γ does not refer or correspond to anything beyond itself. He concludes from this that whereas the ‘I’-as-object might plausibly be used to pick out a person and that this entails the possibility of error through misidentification, in using ‘I’-subject, there is no possibility of error through

10 Wittgenstein, 194. For more on the ‘I’-as-subject/’I’-as-object distinction) see Wittgenstein, 188-9.
11 Hacker, 223.
12 Wittgenstein, 190.
13 Ibid., 190.
14 Ibid., 190. As the Wittgenstein might have explained it, the identity sign (i.e. ‘=’) in ‘γ=γ’ is nonsensical: all that we might meaningfully use is ‘γ’ itself. Cf. ibid., 22: “5.53 Identity of the object I express by identity of the sign and not by means of a sign of identity.” (From Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus.)
misidentification because it does not refer at all.\textsuperscript{15} This non-demonstrative use of ‘I’ is construed instead as an expression, e.g. a moan of pain, a cry of fear or an expression of being in the state of believing something, rather than the attribution of pain, fear or belief to the person the ‘I’ picks out.\textsuperscript{16} Hence, Wittgenstein rejects the claim that the meaning of ‘I’ can be construed as a reference to ‘the person who is now speaking’ or to ‘L.W.’ (i.e. to Ludwig Wittgenstein when he uses the word ‘I’).\textsuperscript{17}

The fact that Wittgenstein abandoned this distinction in his subsequent writings\textsuperscript{18} does not encourage us conclude that it is a particularly illuminating one. However, rather ironically, the reason why his distinction between ‘I’-as-object and ‘I’-as-subject has been deemed “confused”\textsuperscript{19} hints at a way in which we can rehabilitate the conception of ‘I’ as a referring term and solve the puzzles of the first person. As Hacker\textsuperscript{20} points out, in the cases where there is a possibility for error through misidentification in the use of ‘I’-as-object, it is not because we mistakenly recognise someone else for ourselves (i.e. an error of misidentification of the person referred to) but rather we mistakenly think that their body-part is ours (i.e. a misattribution of an object to ourselves). This leaves intact the immunity to error through misidentification which is present in the misattribution; that is, ‘I’ in ‘I have a bump on my forehead’ still refers without error to me, even if the bump on the forehead is not mine. Hence, it is this identity (of the \(\gamma\)-kind in the triangle example) which requires further investigation. Further support that this is the right path to take comes from the non sequitur in Wittgenstein’s reasoning: it does not follow from the fact that ‘I’ is not always used as a demonstrative pronoun that it does not refer by ostension or demonstration. Thus, in order to find the unifying principle behind the various uses of ‘I’ and solve the puzzle of the first person, it is necessary for us to find a model of meaning and reference which explains this immunity to error through misidentification without recourse to Wittgenstein’s model.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Hacker, 219.
\textsuperscript{16} Wittgenstein, 198-201.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 189: “the word ‘I’ does not mean the same as ‘L.W.’ even if I am L.W., nor does it mean the same as the expression ‘the person who is now speaking’.”
\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Hacker, 219. Also Bakhurst, 232.
\textsuperscript{19} Bakhurst, 232
\textsuperscript{20} Hacker, 220.
of “ostensive definition.” In the following section, I will explain how this might be achieved through Chalmers’ model of two dimensional semantics.

**§2: Two-Dimensional Semantics – A Solution to the Puzzle?**

Chalmers puts forward two-dimensional semantics as a solution to a number of puzzles concerning the contents of thought and its relation to reference and meaning. For the purposes of this paper, the crucial point is the distinction he makes between the epistemic intension/content and the subjunctive intension/content of concepts. A concept’s extension consists of the thing or things (in the most general sense: persons, qualities, objects etc.) that the concept can be legitimately applied to and the concept’s intension determines what the concept’s extension will be. The subjunctive intension is tied to the way the actual world is, such that the subjunctive intension of a concept “picks out its extension in all possible worlds.” The epistemic intension is not tied to the way the actual world is, so that the epistemic content for a concept “picks out its extension in a scenario considered as actual.” In other words, subjunctive content consists of whatever a concept picks out given the state of the actual world, whereas epistemic content consists of whatever a concept might pick out in a possible world regardless of the state of the actual world. Hence, there are two dimensions of content (i.e. meaning), epistemic and subjunctive, to a concept.

The distinction is quite hard to grasp without a more concrete example at hand so it would be well to consider two clarificatory cases Chalmers himself gives. First, consider the famous Twin Earth thought-experiment where ‘water’ picks out or means H$_2$O on Earth, whereas it means (the chemical compound) XYZ on Twin Earth. Chalmers states that these seemingly incompatible reference-relations, ‘water’=H$_2$O and ‘water’=XYZ can be made sense of via an appeal to two-dimensional semantics. The epistemic content of ‘water’ is either H$_2$O or XYZ given that Earth and Twin Earth are considered merely as possible scenarios. If I consider myself as inhabiting Earth, ‘water’ picks out or means H$_2$O but if I consider myself as inhabiting Twin Earth, ‘water’ means XYZ. However, the subjunctive intension of water, i.e. given the state of the actual world where ‘water’ means only H$_2$O, its

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21 Wittgenstein, 191. i.e. the model of meaning and reference according to which meaning is determined by reference, construed as the picking out of one object amongst others.

22 Chalmers, 609.

23 Ibid., 614. The equivalence of ‘intension’ and ‘content’ is established on 616.

24 Ibid., 613.

25 Ibid., 610.
extension in all possible worlds is H$_2$O, including on Twin Earth where XYZ would be “merely watery stuff.”

As Chalmers states, “the epistemic intension is tied to the way that a subject thinks of water [i.e. as watery stuff], while the subjunctive intension is tied to water’s underlying nature [in the actual world].” This has the important result that in order to determine what a concept (e.g. ‘water’) means, we need first of all to determine the “centered world [...] a world from a perspective, marked by a viewpoint at its center” to which the concept belongs, i.e. the particular personal viewpoint we occupy in a (possible) world/scenario.

Our second example, where Chalmers ponders the nature of indexical thoughts and in particular the concept of ‘I’, takes us back to Wittgenstein. The epistemic intension/content of the concept ‘I’ “picks out the individual at the center of the scenario” and the subjunctive intension/content of ‘I’ “picks out its actual extension in all possible worlds.” For example, the epistemic content of ‘I’ in “I am David Chalmers,” picks out possible worlds or scenarios in which the person at the centre is David Chalmers. Hence, anyone could take up this position or inhabit that scenario so that the epistemic content of his/her thought, “I am David Chalmers”, would be correct as long as s/he considers that scenario to be actual. However, given the world as it actually is, the subjunctive content of the ‘I’ determines that only David Chalmers’ thought is correct.

The question remains as to how we might this apply to Wittgenstein’s puzzles of the first person. The crux of the solution to the puzzle is the overturning of Wittgenstein’s ostensive theory of reference. Whereas for Wittgenstein, ‘I’ is used to pick out one person among others in the world, Chalmers reverses the reference relation: ‘I’ picks out the scenario/perspective in which a certain person is the centre of the world. Furthermore, this shows that the way in which ‘I’ picks out a person is not through an external ostensive connection, but rather through intension, an internal connection which obtains between ‘I’ and each person who uses ‘I’. This is precisely why ‘I’ is immune to error through misidentification. Hence, even though we might also accept that ‘I am in pain’, ‘I am afraid’ or ‘I believe x’ are also expressions of pain, fear or the state of believing something, this does not entail that ‘I’ does not also refer to the person who expresses it. Granted, ‘I’ is not

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26 Chalmers, 612.
27 Ibid., 609. The text in square brackets is my addition.
28 Ibid., 611.
29 Ibid., 614 and 615.
a demonstrative pronoun, but a pronoun does not need to demonstrate to refer. Wittgenstein claims that “‘I’ does not mean the same as ‘L.W.’ even if I am L.W., nor does it mean the same as ‘the person who is now speaking’.” However, this is only half the story. As with the example of ‘water’ given previously, the epistemic content of ‘I’ is tied to the way in which a subject thinks of the concept ‘I’ (i.e. as ‘the person who is now speaking’, including me) but the subjunctive content is tied to its underlying nature (solely the subject themselves). From the perspective from which subjunctive (but not epistemic) content emerges, L.W.’s use of ‘I’ does mean the same as ‘L.W.’ From the perspective from which epistemic (but not subjunctive) content emerges, L.W.’s use of ‘I’ does not mean the same as ‘L.W.’ since the centre of the world to which the ‘I’ refers (intensionally) has not yet been established. Yet, of course, ‘I’ still refers to the person at the centre. Thus, the intensional reference is the deeper use which determines the unitary meaning of ‘I’.

**Conclusion**

Hence, it seems that we have found an alternative model of reference in Chalmers two-dimensional semantics which explains the immunity to error through misidentification in the use ‘I’ and which nevertheless preserves the sense in which ‘I’-as-subject is not used to refer. Two-dimensional semantics has proved useful in providing the ‘bigger picture’ of reference and meaning to Wittgenstein’s first person puzzles. The reference/meaning-relation need not always be a pointing to something outside of oneself but can be determined internally through intension. Wittgenstein might object that such an internal relation prevents anyone from ever being able to describe legitimately or meaningfully their perspective as their own. He states that “[i]nasmuch as it cannot be anyone else’s, it is not mine either.” However, by presenting the various ways in which in ‘I’ is used, Wittgenstein’s own analysis has made crystal clear that the illegitimacy of describing the first person perspective as owned, in no way precludes our ability to use ‘I’ meaningfully. It must also be noted that Wittgenstein would find no qualms conceding these points. As Hacker states:

> What matters crucially is that one be aware of the differences; and if thereafter, one wants to say that ‘I’ is nevertheless a kind of referring expression [...] nothing need hang on that preference as long as one does not

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30 Wittgenstein, 189.
31 Ibid., 192.
assimilate the function of the word ‘I’ to an inappropriate paradigm of reference.\textsuperscript{32}

I hope it is now clear that two-dimensional semantics has provided us with a more appropriate paradigm of reference and a solution to Wittgenstein’s puzzles of the first person; one which he himself might even agree to.

\textsuperscript{32} Hacker, 228.
Bibliography


