TWO FACES HAVE "I"¹

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In paragraphs 398 to 411 of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein discusses "I" in first-person reports of an individual's mental life. Most interpreters take Wittgenstein to be arguing against the view that in such reports "I" refers to some object or entity. Ultimately, Wittgenstein suggests that the use of "I" is a mode of expression or behavioral manifestation of the mental life. (PI § 404)

In this paper, however, I will be primarily concerned with explicating and defending Wittgenstein's claim that "I" does refer in certain contexts even though it does not designate anything in first-person reports of an individual's mental life. In Sections I and II, I'll explain and defend this dual role of "I" by focusing on *referring* as a concept which is language-game dependent. The intimate connection between the language-game of *referring* and the language-game of *falsifiability* will be of crucial importance in this regard. In the remaining two sections, I'll attempt to show that it is a lack of attention to this aspect of Wittgenstein's work which led Norman Malcolm, among others, to conclude that "I" never refers.

I

"I"'s Dual Function

In the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein explains the distinction between referring and non-referring uses of "I" in terms of objective and subjective uses of the first-person.

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There are two different cases in the use of the word “I” (of “my”) which I might call “the use as object” and “the use as subject”. Examples of the first kind of use are these: “My arm is broken”, “I have grown six inches”, “I have a bump on my forehead”, “The wind blows my hair about”. Examples of the second kind are: “I see so-and-so”, “I hear so-and-so”, “I try to lift my arm”, “I think it will rain”, “I have toothache”. One can point to the difference between these two categories by saying: The cases of the first category involve the recognition of a particular person, and there is in these cases the possibility of an error, or as I should rather put it: The possibility of an error has been provided for. The possibility of failing to score has been provided for in a pin ball game. On the other hand, it is not one of the hazards of the game that the balls should fail to come up if I have put a penny in the slot. It is possible that, say in an accident, I should feel a pain in my arm, see a broken arm at my side, and think it is mine, when really it is my neighbour’s. And I could, looking into a mirror, mistake a bump on his forehead for one on mine. On the other hand, there is no question of recognizing a person when I say I have toothache. To ask “are you sure that it’s you who have pains?” would be nonsensical. (BB, pp. 66-67)

Clearly, Wittgenstein is not maintaining that “I” never refers; the point is, rather, that it does not refer when it is used as subject. But a second important fact we can glean from the above passage is this: the possibility that an “I”-statement is false marks it as an instance of “I” as object. And conversely, if there is no possibility that an “I”-statement is false, “I” functions as subject. The language-game of (first-person) referring, then, is conceptually bound up with the language-game of falsifiability.

II
The Grammar of Sense-data

Wittgenstein insists that a dramatic shift takes place in the grammar of our language when talk shifts to mental images and sense-data. He also suggests that we must be attuned to this shift in grammar lest we fall into philosophical perplexity. In fact, it’s just such a failure to recognize the shift that gives rise to the conviction that there must be some “self” which underlies the “I” as subject; viz., the “I” as it’s used in our reports of sense-data. In the Blue Book, he writes: