MEMORY JUDGMENTS AND IMMUNITY TO ERROR THROUGH MISIDENTIFICATION

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Summary
First person judgments that are immune to error through misidentification (IEM) are fundamental to self-conscious thought. The IEM status of many such judgments can be understood in terms of the possession conditions of the concepts they involve. However, this approach cannot be extended to first person judgments based on autobiographical memory. The paper develops an account of why such judgments have the IEM property and how thinkers are able to exploit this fact in inference.

1. Immunity to error through misidentification

The notion of immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first person pronoun was first introduced in those terms by Sydney Shoemaker in 1968. Its intellectual antecedents go some way further back, however. As Shoemaker himself recognized, they can be traced to Wittgenstein’s distinction in The Blue Book between uses of “I” as subject and uses of “I” as object. Here is Wittgenstein’s statement of the distinction between the two different types of use.

There are two different cases in the use of the word “I” (or “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 try to lift my arm,” “I think it will rain,” “I have a toothache.” (Wittgenstein 1958, 66f.)

What distinguishes the two different uses of “I” is that only the use as object permits a certain type of error.
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 ... It is possible that, say in an accident, I should feel a pain in my arm, see an 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. (Wittgenstein 1958, 67)

The type of error that is possible in uses of “I” as object but not in uses of “I” as subject is an error of misidentification. When a speaker makes a statement of the form “I am F” (or a thinker makes a judgment that would typically be expressed with those words), and when the “I” is being used as object, it is perfectly possible for the speaker to know that someone is F, but to misidentify herself as the person who is F. This type of error is not possible when “I” is being used as subject.

The distinction between “I” as subject and “I” as object is not absolute. Whether a given form of words counts as one or the other depends upon the context and, in particular, upon the evidence on which the assertion is based. So, to take one of Wittgenstein’s examples, I might say “I have a toothache” because I feel a pain in my tooth. This would clearly be a use of “I” as subject. I cannot feel a pain and then wonder whether that pain is mine. Suppose, however, that I have an unlocalized pain in my lower jaw. I wonder where exactly the pain is and consult a neuroscientist who is able, using scanning technology, to locate the pain in my tooth. If I then say “I have a toothache” I would be using “I” as object because the possibility of error has entered the picture—my scan might have got mixed up with someone else’s, for example, with the result that, although I am feeling pain, it is not actually me whose tooth is aching.

Shoemaker’s characterization of immunity to error is evidence-relative in this sense. He writes:

To say that a statement “a is $\phi$” is subject to error through misidentification relative to the term ‘a’ means that the following is possible: The speaker knows some particular thing to be $\phi$, but makes the mistake of asserting “a is $\phi$” because, and only because, he mistakenly thinks that the thing he knows to be $\phi$ is what ‘a’ refers to. (Shoemaker 1968, 7f.)