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First person thought

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The first thing we can say about first person thoughts is that they are the sort of thought one may express by using the first person : ‘I am hungry’, ‘I was born in Paris’, ‘I have crossed knees’. The second thing we can say is that they are *thoughts about the thinker of the thought*. Let us start from there, and see whether, building on these features, we can arrive at a proper characterisation of this class of thought.

Can we use the second feature – reflexivity – to define first person thoughts ? No, or at least not if we care about the first feature ; for a thought can be about the thinker of the thought *without* being the sort of thought one would express by using the first person. One may have a thought about oneself even though one does not realize that the thought is about oneself (as when one sees oneself in the mirror, without realizing that one is self-seeing). Such a thought is not a first person thought even though, extensionally, it is about oneself.

In the other direction, however, the entailment holds : a thought that can be expressed by using the first person will be about oneself, as a matter of necessity. Let us suppose that the thinker holds a thought that is *not* about himself or herself. Could he or she express such a thought by using the first person ? Answer : No, because we use the first person to refer to ourselves. (That is a *linguistic fact* about the first person.) To be sure, it seems that we may use the first person to express a thought that is not about ourselves, in a situation in which we mistakenly *believe* that the thought is about ourselves. But let us take a closer look at such a situation. If I believe that the winner will go to Tahiti, and I mistakenly believe that I am the winner, my thought ‘The winner will go to Tahiti’ will not be about myself but I will take it to be about myself. As a result, I will be in a position to use the first person in expressing my belief : ‘I will go to Tahiti’. In such a case, however, there are *two* thoughts : the initial thought (‘The winner will go to Tahiti’) is *not* about myself, but the mistaken belief that I am the winner leads me to form another thought which *is* about myself : the thought that I will go

to Tahiti. It is *that* thought — a thought about myself — which I express by using the first person.

The natural conclusion to draw from what has been said so far is that the first feature — expressibility by means of the linguistic first person — is the crucial feature one should use in characterising first person thought. The other feature follows from such a characterisation. A first person thought necessarily is a thought about the thinker because (i) it is a thought one would express by using the first person, and (ii) the first person is governed by the rule that we use it (only) to refer to ourselves.

Yet there is something deeply dissatisfying about this approach to first person thought. We appeal to the notion of a first person sentence to characterise first person thought, but when we attempt to characterise the (linguistic) first person, we appeal to the token-reflexive rule : the fact that we use the first person to refer to ourselves. Now, to follow the token-reflexive rule, we need to think of ourselves *as ourselves* — we need to think first person thoughts.

Suppose I *am* the winner and I believe, as before, that the winner will go to Tahiti. This will not lead me to say ‘I will go to Tahiti’ unless I also believe that *I* am the winner and (therefore) that *I* will go to Tahiti. But what is it to believe that I am the winner, or that I will go to Tahiti ? These are first person thoughts, aren’t they ? What this shows is that the capacity to use the first person in language presupposes the capacity to think first person thoughts. It follows that the characterisation of first person thoughts in terms of first person utterances is ok only if it’s a way of ‘fixing the reference’ of the phrase ‘first person thought’, for exposition purposes ; but it cannot be used to reach any substantive conclusion regarding first person thoughts. In particular, contrary to what one might have thought, it cannot be used to answer the question : *Why* is a first person thought necessarily a thought about the thinker ? To answer that question in a satisfactory manner, we need to abstract from the linguistic expression of first person thought : we need a way of characterising first person thoughts that is independent of issues of linguistic expression.

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If we abstract from linguistic expression, what can we say about first person thoughts ? I said earlier that we cannot characterise such thoughts as thoughts that are about the thinker of the thought, for many thoughts will be about the thinker of the thought by accident (as in the case of the mirror). Still, there is something to the idea that first person thoughts are thoughts about

the thinker of the thought. There actually are two senses in which a thought can be about the thinker : a superficial sense in which a thought can be about the thinker without being a first person thought, and a deeper sense in which it cannot. A similar contrast arises in the language case : there too we have to draw a distinction between utterances that are accidentally about the speaker and utterances that are about the speaker in a more fundamental sense (first person utterances).

If the speaker happens to be the winner and he or she says, ‘The winner will go to Tahiti’, her utterance is about herself but only in the accidental sense. This is not enough to make it a first person utterance. First person utterances are about the speaker in a more fundamental sense : it is a conventional rule of the language that an utterance of the first person is about the speaker of that utterance. The relevant convention governs the reference of ‘I’ : it is a conventional property of the word type ‘I’ that a token of that word refers to the speaker. So we need to distinguish two levels in the linguistic case : the linguistic meaning of the type (Kaplan’s ‘character’) and the referential ‘content’ carried by a token of the type. A token of ‘The winner will go to Tahiti’ uttered by the winner will be about the **speaker** at the token level but not at the type level. Clearly, the type expression ‘the winner’ is not such that its tokens are supposed to refer to the speaker. In the case of ‘I’, however, reflexivity – the fact that a token of ‘I’ refers to the speaker — *is* encoded in the meaning of the type and is not merely an accidental property of the token.

Can we say analogous things about first person thoughts ? Evidently, the notion of conventional meaning does not apply in the mental realm. What we need is a property of the type that plays the same role as conventional meaning plays in the language case. Such a property must explain why the first person type in thought (the first person concept, as several philosophers call it) refers to the thinker of the thought, just as the conventional meaning of ‘I’ explains why a token of that word refers to the speaker.

The relevant property exists, I take it. As I argue at length elsewhere (Recanati 2012), we can think of indexical concepts in general (and the first person concept in particular) as ‘mental files’ whose function is to store putative knowledge gained in virtue of standing in certain types of relation to the referent. The relevant relations are *epistemically rewarding* (ER) relations. An ER relation is a relation such that, when one stands in that relation to some object, one can gain knowledge about the object through the relation. The relation establishes

a channel of information between the subject and the object.¹ The suggestion, then, is that there are mental files which are based on such relations and whose role is to store the putative knowledge gained in virtue of standing in that relation to the object. What fixes the reference of the file (what the file is about) is not the information in the file — for that can be misinformation — but the relation : the file refers to the object to which the subject stands in the relevant ER relation.

ER relations can be described as relations that are conducive to knowledge, given the (contingent) cognitive equipment of the thinker. In general, we have ways of gaining knowledge about individuals which depend upon our standing in the right relations to these individuals. Different ways correspond to different relations. First person ways of gaining information (through proprioception, kinaesthesia, introspection and so on) correspond to the relation in which one stands to an individual when one *is* that individual. So the relevant ER relation, in the first person case, is the relation of identity. That relation makes knowledge possible, given the cognitive equipment of the thinker. The knowledge one can get about an object in virtue of standing in the identity relation to that object is ‘first person knowledge’, or ‘knowledge from inside’ – the sort of knowledge one gains through proprioception and kinaesthesia. So I agree with Evans’s epistemic approach to the reference of first person thoughts, and its recent defence by Morgan (Evans 1982 ; Morgan forthcoming).² The rule of reference – that the first person concept refers to the thinker – *follows from* the fact that an indexical file refers to the object to which the thinker stands in the ER relation which it is the function of the file to exploit. In the first person case the relation is identity, and the reference of the file is the thinker.

On this view, the type/token distinction applies to mental files. Mental files are typed according to the type of ER relation they exploit. Thus the SELF file (my name for the first person concept) exploits the relation to oneself (viz. identity) in virtue of which one can gain knowledge about oneself in a special way, ‘from inside’ — a way in which one can gain

¹ Lewis calls such relations ‘acquaintance relations’. Besides perceptual acquaintance, Lewis makes room for ‘more tenuous relations of epistemic rapport’ :

There are relations that someone bears to me when I get a letter from him, or I watch the swerving of a car he is driving, or I read his biography, or I hear him mentioned by name, or I investigate the clues he has left at the scene of his crime. In each case there are causal chains from him to me of a sort which would permit a flow of information. Perhaps I do get accurate information ; perhaps I get misinformation, but still the channel is there. (Lewis 1999 : 380-81).

² This paper started its life as a response to Morgan’s paper as part of the 5th Online Consciousness Conference : see <http://consciousnessonline.com/2013/02/15/a-demonstrative-model-of-first-person-thought/>

knowledge about no one else (as Frege puts it). My SELF file is not the same as yours, and they refer to different persons, of course, but they belong to the same type : they are both SELF files, unified by the common ER relation it is their function to exploit. We see that the *function* of files — namely, informational exploitation of the relevant ER relation — plays the same role as the conventional meaning of indexicals : through their functional role, mental file types map to types of ER relations, just as, through their linguistic meaning (their character), indexical types map to types of contextual relation between token and referent.

One final note : there is an important asymmetry between two types of first person thought : those which correspond to (putative) items of first person knowledge gained through the relevant epistemically rewarding relations to the referent (‘I am hungry’, ‘My knees are crossed’, when these thoughts are based on the appropriate first person experience), and those which do not even putatively correspond to items of first person knowledge (‘I was born in Paris’ — a first person thought corresponding to a piece of knowledge that can only be gained third-personally). The epistemic relation which is conducive to first person knowledge in the former type of case is what fixes the reference of the file, on my account, but the file *also* hosts information delivered through other avenues of knowledge than the special ways we have of gaining information about ourselves. (A hallmark of information about ourselves gained third-personally is that it is vulnerable to error through misidentification, while information gained first-personally is immune to such error.)³

Why is the SELF file hospitable to information gained in other ways than the first person way ? Because of the following principle governing files : *Two pieces of information (or misinformation) are stored in the same file if they are taken to be about the same object.* In this way, pieces of information which are not putative items of first person knowledge may go into the same file as first person thoughts which are putative items of first person knowledge. For example, if I believe that the winner will go to Tahiti, and hear that I won, I readily infer that I will go to Tahiti. That first person thought is based on a premise (‘I am the winner’) which makes it vulnerable to error through misidentification ; and that is enough to show that the information that I will go to Tahiti is not gained in the first person way, from inside. In contrast, the information that I am being addressed by the person who tells me ‘You won’ is gained in the first person way. All these pieces of information — that I am being addressed, that I won, that I will go to Tahiti — end up in the same file, whatever their origin.

³ See Shoemaker 1968 and, for recent work in that area, Prosser and Recanati 2012.

I conclude that a first person thought is a thought which deploys the first person concept, where the first person concept is construed as a mental file based on the ER relation of identity. Such thoughts are about the thinker because the self concept refers to the individual that bears that ER relation to the thinker of the thought.

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