WHICH IMMUNITY TO ERROR?

ABSTRACT. Two accounts of immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first-person pronoun are in currency. I argue that only one of these captures that class of self-ascriptions that are central to self-consciousness.

1. INTRODUCTION

A self-ascription is a thought or sentence in which a predicate is self-consciously ascribed to oneself. Self-ascriptions are best expressed using the first-person pronoun. Mental self-ascriptions are ascriptions to oneself of mental predicates (predicates that designate mental properties), non-mental self-ascriptions are ascriptions to oneself of non-mental predicates (predicates that designate non-mental properties). It is often claimed that there is a range of self-ascriptions that are immune to error through misidentification relative to the first-person pronoun (IEM for short). What this means, and exactly which self-ascriptions are properly classed as IEM, is a topic hotly disputed. Some claim that only mental self-ascriptions are IEM, others claim that some non-mental self-ascriptions are IEM. Before this question can be decided, it needs to be judged exactly what it means to say that a self-ascription is IEM. And here we stumble across the fact that there are, at least, two non-equivalent ways of defining the phenomenon. I will be claiming that one of these definitions should be rejected.

Before setting out my argument, it is worth considering what the point of the debate concerning IEM is. Standardly, the
claim that a given class of self-ascriptions is IEM has been taken to suggest that those self-ascriptions are in some way particularly closely associated with self-consciousness. IEM is a feature of self-ascriptions that marks their centrality to our conception of ourselves as self-conscious subjects. Whence much of the interest in arguing for, or against, the claim that such-and-such a class of self-ascriptions (for instance, those based on memory, or bodily-awareness) are IEM. It follows from this that an account of IEM should, at the very least, capture those self-ascriptions that are agreed by all to be central to our conception of ourselves as self-conscious subjects. Specifically, an account of IEM should imply that the self-ascription of occurrent mental episodes (e.g., ‘I have a headache’) are IEM. I argue that only one of the two definitions mentioned above can secure this claim.

2. THE STANDARD FORMULATION OF IEM

The phenomenon of IEM was first brought to our attention by Wittgenstein who, in The Blue Book claims that, “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 neighbours... On the other hand, there is no question of recognising a person when I say I have toothache. To ask ‘are you sure that it is you who have pains?’ would be nonsensical.” (Wittgenstein, 1958, pp. 66–67). Wittgenstein is here pointing out that a certain class of self-ascriptions are immune to a particular kind of error.

As elucidated by Wittgenstein the notion of IEM is left rather vague. It is Shoemaker who first gives us a precise definition. He writes, “to say that a statement ‘a is φ’ 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 φ, but makes the mistake of asserting ‘a is φ’ because, and only because, he mistakenly thinks that the thing he knows to be φ is what ‘a’ refers to” (Shoemaker, 1968, pp. 7–8).

One thing that clearly must be added to this definition is relativity to grounds. It is obvious that a judgement may be