Cartesians, Strawsonians
and the Univocal Meaning of Mental Predicates

The paper examines the Cartesian and the Strawsonian answers to the question of why self-applied and other-applied mental predicates mean the same. While these answers relate to different, complementary aspects of this question, they seem and are usually considered as incompatible. Indeed, their apparent incompatibility constitutes a major objection to the Cartesian answer. A primary aim of the paper is to show that the Strawsonian answer does not pose a real problem to the Cartesian answer. Unlike other attempts to show this, the paper does not seek to undermine the Strawsonian answer. Indeed, its second aim is to defend this answer against these other attempts. The paper's strategy in defending the Cartesian answer is to show that the framework underlying this answer can – indeed, for internal reasons, must – accommodate the Strawsonian answer. By showing this, the paper also shows that a Cartesian framework can provide a comprehensive answer to the aforementioned question, which is its third aim.

Keywords: Descartes, Strawson, mental predicates, meaning, generality constraint, personal identity.

1. Introduction

Why do the mental predicates we apply to ourselves mean the same as the mental predicates we apply to others? The Cartesian answer is that this is because we extrapolate the meaning of the latter, other-applied predicates from the meaning of the former, self-applied predicates. The Strawsonian answer is that this is because mastery of the mental predicates we apply to ourselves requires the ability to apply these predicates to others. Obviously, the Cartesian answer, but not the Strawsonian one, rules out the possibility of there being mental predicates with an exclusive third-person use. Conversely, of these two answers
only the Strawsonian one rules out the possibility of there being mental predicates with an exclusive first-person use. This might suggest that the Cartesian and Strawsonian answers should be considered as complementary. However, the Cartesian answer implies that mastery of third-person use requires a prior mastery of first-person use, while the Strawsonian answer implies that mastery of first-person use cannot be prior to mastery of third-person use. So the two answers seem and are usually considered to be incompatible (Strawson 1959, chap. 3; Bermúdez 1998, 231). Indeed, the claim that they are incompatible constitutes a major objection to the Cartesian answer.

A primary aim of this paper is to show that the Strawsonian answer does not pose a real problem to the Cartesian answer. Unlike other attempts to show this (e.g. Bermúdez 1998, 230-237), I will not seek to undermine the Strawsonian answer. Indeed, I will defend this answer against the line of argument employed by these other attempts, which is a second aim of the paper. My strategy in defending the Cartesian answer will be to show that the Cartesian framework underlying this answer can - indeed, for internal reasons, must - accommodate the Strawsonian answer. By showing this I will also show that a Cartesian framework can provide a comprehensive answer to my opening question, which is a third aim of the paper.

The Cartesian answer has faced other objections besides the one examined in this paper. These objections are highly relevant to the comprehensive answer the Cartesian framework provides to my opening question. Nevertheless I shall not examine them in the paper, let alone seek to refute them.1 My objective is merely to defend the Cartesian framework against one central objection, and to exhibit one major aspect of this framework’s explanatory utility.

2. In Defense of the Strawsonian Answer

The Strawsonian answer is premised on the widely accepted Generality Constraint on predicate mastery. This constraint, which originated in Kant (1933, B-377) and was introduced to contemporary discussions by Strawson (1959, 99) and Evans (1982, 100-105), comprises two generality requirements. The first requirement is for generality with respect to the individuals to which a

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1 In Levin 2001 and 2004a I defend the Cartesian answer against the main Wittgenstenian objections it has faced, and in Levin 2005 I defend it against Sellars’ objection.