

# Do I agree with Strawson that adopting the introspective style of thinking that Descartes adopts in his Meditations may lead one to deceive oneself about the meaning of 'I'?

by Andrew Peasgood

"I know that I exist; the question is, what is this 'I' that I know?"

(Descartes, 'Second Meditation on the Nature of the Human Mind') (1)

"What, then, is the source of the Cartesian delusion? ... [A] particularly important one is a certain experience of intense looking within, or introspective concentration. ... One is tempted to say that in such moments that one has direct experience of oneself as a conscious being. And this may be a harmless thing to say. But it may put us on the path of illusion"

(Strawson, 'Self, Mind and Body') (2)

How can we be deceived about what 'I' means? After all, 'I', 'me', is what we can be most sure of. Yet Strawson, in 'Self, Mind and Body', argues that the reasoning of Descartes for separation of mind and body creates an 'I' that is too narrow and, literally, self-defeating.

Descartes' analysis through doubt shows that our own existence is the first, the only thing we can know for certain. We may doubt our body, but not our 'inner' existence. The 'I' that I know is not therefore the bodily, space-occupying entity, but something else, the thinking and feeling entity. If for Descartes the thinking he is undertaking does not necessarily cause the existence, it does however provide him with evidence of existence, sufficient for him to link existence to the mind, the non-physical mental aspect of himself. Descartes treats this mind as his essence, his 'I'. It could be argued that all Descartes can be sure of is that there is thinking going on, evidence of simple consciousness. However, to know that there is thinking going on is to be aware of what thinking is, and that it is 'somebody' - in this case, Descartes - that is doing the thinking. So Descartes exists as a thinking thing. What, though, is it about this thing, this consciousness, that gives it that unique identity that is 'Descartes', and by extension also creates others, including you, and me?

Self-awareness of our existence may not be the same as knowing what we are, what is our self-identity. We seek, therefore, to define and describe the individual 'I' that is each of us; and then, to be able to differentiate it from all the other 'I's, we need to find its personal identifying characteristics. However, our self does not, for its own continuing existence, need to know if or how it differs from others. We should not have need to identify our self to ourselves. Only if we wish to consider ourselves in relation to others might we need to be aware of our self-identity. One only needs to identify oneself to another. Identification is being done for the benefit of another, say to help C differentiate A from B. Therefore personal identity only exists in relational sense. Can there be an identity that does not rely on the existence of others? You can't be individual without others from whom you are separate.

If we agree with Strawson's reasoning that the words 'I' and 'me' are used linguistically in interpersonal communication, as identifiers (designators) of a person in relation to others, then these cannot be applied to the mind that they are considering in isolation from all others. What is the Cartesian able to examine through introspection, looking in only at

'himself'? He can only examine 'this mind', not 'my mind'. Indeed Strawson goes a step further, asking even how use of "the little word 'the' – implying a reference to a single one – before 'mind' or 'consciousness'" can be justified.

Firstly, then, must be addressed the issues of numerability and consistency. To be able to apply 'I' the Cartesian has to assume that 'this mind' with which he is communicating is a single, consistent mind. He can be sure that there is only a single body, but he cannot be sure he is communicating with a single associated mind. There could be many minds, each with its own identity, as the instigator of individual facets of the body's messages. These diverse minds could be communicating at any one time; and similarly at different times it could be different minds communicating from the same body.

If this hurdle is cleared, what then is 'this mind' that has been identified? Our mind being immaterial, identity cannot be defined by physical attributes. What concepts of identity can we use that are not grounded in materiality? Identity could be expressed, as Descartes described, through the unique qualities of 'understanding, affirming and denying, willingness and un-willingness, imagination and sensory perception': but something needs to be understood, affirmed, or imagined. What we are then doing is identifying to another aspects of the greater person, comprising the mind/soul/consciousness and the body. So it seems impossible to differentiate one mind from another without linking each mind firmly to a body. It is only through essential linkage to a body that we can give identity to the consciousness.

Strawson views the mind/body/person issue from that of an outside observer, as that of 'another', rather than ones-self. So with what is 'he', Strawson, (disregarding the detailed nature of him-self for now) communicating when addressing and listening to another? He can only receive what is being communicated to him via the other's body. So, following Strawson's argument, 'I' needs to be anchored to, and defined in terms of, the whole person. 'I' must be linked not only to a body but to the world in which that body exists. The personal characteristics – attitudes, memories, as well as bodily appearance – with which we define our individual identities are for the most part expressed through difference from those other identities around us which we perceive and with which we compare and interact.

For the Cartesians pursuing their mind-body separation, introspection leads away from, not towards, enlightenment. Descartes' use of 'I' claims identity but gives us no more than 'existence', with which we can achieve little. Strawson, instead, sets out our possession of human identity, endowing us with something far richer and fuller.

After this analysis we may still consider our understanding of ourselves to be uncertain. Perhaps it is easier for you to know me than for me to know myself.

### References/Bibliography

(1) Descartes, Rene: 'Second Meditation on the Nature of the Human Mind' (1641); taken from 'Meditations on First Philosophy': translated D M Clarke; 1998, London, Penguin

(2) Strawson, P.E.; 'Self, Mind and Body' (1959): taken from 'Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays'; 1974, London, Methuen & Co Ltd