

SELFCONSCIOUSNESS

(I)

Who am I? Suppose I "ask myself"¹ this question, and suppose I produce the following answer: "I am R. G., father of L. G., etc." Would this answer necessarily satisfy me? I don't think so, because I could go on to "ask myself"² the further question: "But who is this person of whom I have said that he is R. G., father of L. G., etc.?" Would the satisfactory answer to *this* question be: "I, myself, the thinker of this as well as the preceding thoughts"? The really crucial part of this answer is the element "I, myself," because with regard to the "thinker of certain thoughts" I could "ask,"³ again, "But, who is the person of whom I say that he is the thinker of this as well as the preceding thoughts?" So what are we to say about the thought "I, myself" as an answer—a clinching answer—to the question "Who am I?". Is it a clinching answer? To suppose that it is, would involve the supposition that the thought "I, myself", as thought by me, in some way uniquely indentified me. And this identification of myself by myself for myself would have to radically differ from the sort of identification of a person—even of it were a unique identification—which depends upon the correct application, vis-a-vis the person in question, of a descriptive phrase or referring expression. The thought "I, myself" would have to be supposed by me to identify me non-descriptively, non-referentially—in *principle* so. (Thus this thought would have to be distinguished from anything analogous to an act of pointing towards a person in order to identify him for a hearer, an act which can always be replaced by an utterance employing a suitable descriptive or referring expression.) But can the thought "I, myself" be said to achieve such non-referential identification? For only then could it be regarded as a clinching reply to the "self-addressed"⁴ question "Who am I?"

Another mode of asking the above question is this : Is there a notion of selfconsciousness such that I may be said to be conscious of myself in a way which necessarily involved my thinking of myself *not* as being a creature of a certain sort, but, quite simply, as being "myself", a unique but bare particular—a "soul" ? I am inclined to deny that there is such a notion of selfconsciousness because I am inclined to think that it does not make sense to talk of non-referentially identifying oneself. However, I shall argue that it *is* possible to speak of oneself *imagining* that one was being non-referentially identified by another person, because it *is* possible to be non-referentially identified by others, and that the notion of selfconsciousness should be regarded as being, at least, the notion of oneself *imagining* that one was being non-referentially identified by another person. I shall also consequently be enabled to argue that this notion of selfconsciousness can be regarded as being equivalent to the notion of *imagining* that one was conscious of another person being conscious of oneself in a way which necessarily involved his thinking of oneself *not* as being a certain sort of creature, but as being "oneself", a unique but bare particular.

(II)

What do I mean by saying that it is possible for one to be non-referentially identified by another person ? Suppose there are three persons, A, B, and C. Suppose A, pointing to C, says to B : "That is C." This would be a case of A identifying C for B. But not *in principle* non-referentially or non-descriptively. A's utterance can always be translated into some such utterance as : "The person standing under the tree over there is C". Suppose, instead,⁵ that A merely *addresses* B, say by issuing the utterance "B !" to B. Would A have *referred* to B in conversation with B ? Certainly not ! This is because the possibility of a conversation starting between A and B depends upon the success of A's act of addressing B. And yet A's act cannot fail to have the force of a communicative utterance of the form "Attend to me !" Now in

so far as A succeeds in addressing B, i.e. in so far as a communicative utterance of the above form may be supposed to have been successfully issued by A to B, A can be said to have non-referentially or non-descriptively—identified B. For B would be brought in possession of the correct answer “He means me” to the question “Who does he mean?”. “He means me” is a thought which B would be logically necessarily brought in possession of as a result of A successfully addressing B. Clearly such non-referential identification is a necessary condition of communication. We could say, equally correctly, that *addressing* (which requires non-referential identification of addressee by addresser) is a necessary condition of communication.

Now I can explain why I said in the previous section that it did not make sense to suppose that one could non-referentially identify oneself. To say this is to say that one cannot significantly be said to “address” oneself. It is because of this belief of mine that I put expressions like *ask* (in relation to the notion of *asking oneself a question*) and *self-addressed* (in relation to the notion of *addressing oneself a question*) inside quotation marks in the previous section. This is because if it doesn’t make sense to speak of addressing oneself, it must also not make sense to speak of communicating with oneself in the literal sense of that expression in *any* form. However, we do have a use in our language for expressions like “asking oneself a question”, “talking to oneself”, etc. I want now to give an account of the basis of the use of such expressions. Take “addressing oneself”, for “addressing oneself” in some sense or other must be the presupposition of all “self-communication”. Why is the literal use of such expressions as “addressing oneself” not significant? The reason for this is that it doesn’t make sense—and with respect to the question in hand it is quite pointless—to suppose that the self—whatever it is—is non-unitary.⁶ It doesn’t make sense to speak of inviting oneself to attend to oneself⁷. One doesn’t stand in need of being

invited—by oneself—to consider the truth or falsity or obedience-worthiness, etc., of the utterances that one “addresses to oneself.”

However, one can always *imagine* that one was being addressed by another person, or that some utterance or other was being addressed to one by another person. The imagined “other person” here need not be anyone in particular, he could be imagined as being quite anonymous. Thus my thought “I, myself” which I believe uniquely and non-referentially identifies me for myself can be regarded as being equivalent to an imagined addressing-utterance issued by an imagined anonymous speaker to me. Thus the thought “I, myself” or, more briefly, the thought “I” can be regarded *not* as identifying a bare particular—“myself”—but as an act of the imagination which puts me in the stance of an “audience”, thereby enabling me to “weigh” utterances which too I imagine as being addressed to myself : i.e. as an act of the imagination which enables me to think in accordance with the requirements of the logic of discourse which governs the audience-speaker relationship. At this point one might ask : How do I acquire the ability to perform the act of imagination (which makes soliloquy possible) referred to above ? I think the answer to this question must be this : I acquire the ability to perform the act of imagination in question *at the same time as* acquiring the ability to *listen* to a real speaker. When, in the course of the process of being inducted into a communicative form of life, I am first successfully *addressed* by a speaker, I must be supposed to be logically necessarily brought in possession of the thought “He wants me to attend to him”. Now being able to think this thought must involve being able to think the thought “me” or “myself” or “I”, i.e. it must involve being able to perform the imaginative act of casting oneself in the role of an audience vis-a-vis an imagined speaker. Thus the word “I” need not be supposed to be the “name” of anything. But it doesn’t follow from this that it connects up with nothing. It connects up with our capacity for soliloquy, among other things.

(III)

In addressing me, you do not refer to me, although you may employ a referring expression for the purpose of addressing me. You may, for instance, say "Mr. Chairman!", which locution involves the employment of the referring expression "Chairman" (not to mention the undoubtedly referring character of the expression "Mr."), and I may well be the Chairman. But you would not have, so far, *referred* to me as the Chairman in conversation with me. Your utterance, involving the utterance of the word "Chairman", would attract my attention to you, but also at the same time to the fact that you were not really trying to attract my attention to yourself in a purely causal fashion (You were not producing the loudest noise that you could produce—something which would attract my attention to you in a much more straightforward manner). It would become clear to me that you were *inviting, soliciting*, my attention—i.e. that you were addressing me. One could also say that your-successful—act of addressing me would make me conscious of the fact that you were conscious of me in a way which necessarily involved your thinking of me, in addressing me, *not* as a certain sort of creature, but as a bare particular—as "myself". (Of course, you would have to take me to be a communicative creature in order that you may be able, in addressing me, to think of me as a bare particular, as "myself"). It would follow from this that my thinking the thought "I", or the thought "I, myself", would involve my imagining that I was conscious of another (anonymous, perhaps) person being conscious of me in a way which necessarily involved his thinking of me as "myself"—a bare particular—and not as a certain sort of creature. I suggest that this is the correct analysis of the notion of selfconsciousness. But the notion of selfconsciousness must also apply to the case where I am *actually* conscious of the fact that another (not anonymous) person is, in addressing me, conscious of me in a way which necessarily involved his thinking of me *not* as a certain sort of creature, but as "myself"—

a bare particular. Thus I am selfconscious when I am actually in a listening-stance vis-a-vis a real speaker, and also when I *imagine* that I am in a listening-stance vis-a-vis an imagined (possibly anonymous) speaker. In both cases I am enabled to think in accordance with the requirements of the logic of discourse.

I think I could maintain that the account of selfconsciousness that I have sought to give is not an eccentric one. Although I have followed different routes of argument, my conclusion is the same as the Kantian conclusion that selfconsciousness is a necessary condition of thinking⁸. What I have emphasized is that thinking has to do with the taking up of actual or imaginative audience-stances vis-a-vis actual or imagined speakers. I have sought to relate the notions of selfconsciousness and thinking to the public phenomenon of human communication.

I have also sought to give some explanation of the basis of the sense of deep self-acquaintance (not self-knowledge by description but, as it were, self-knowledge by acquaintance) which haunts our mental lives. I have implied that this sense of deep self-acquaintance has to do with our actually or imaginatively taking up audience-stances vis-a-vis actual or imagined speakers. This involves our being conscious, or our imagining that we are conscious, of another person being conscious of us in a way which necessarily involves his thinking of us not as creatures of a certain sort, but as bare particulars—as “ourselves”. Of course it doesn't follow from this that we are bare particulars. But the self-imposed illusion, which lies at the heart of the act of addressing, that one's audience is a bare particular, is a necessary condition of communication.

(IV)

There is a puzzle about dreaming which I feel can be sorted out with the aid of the account of selfconsciousness that I have been trying to develop. The puzzle is this. Why is it that, while

we are dreaming, we are unable to ascribe our dream-experience to ourselves? The following reflection should help in answering this question: What is it for us to be able to ascribe experiences to ourselves? Surely our ability to ascribe experiences to ourselves presupposes our ability to soliloquize, i.e. our ability to take up an audience-stance vis-a-vis an imagined speaker or a speaker-stance vis-a-vis an imagined audience (what is expressed in the last part of this sentence is not something I have alluded to in the previous sections, but it can easily be accommodated into my account of the imaginative mode of selfconsciousness). Now we don't *just* soliloquize, we soliloquize under pressure to transform our soliloquies into communications if it becomes necessary to do so. And this is not just a psychological matter. Soliloquizing is preparatory, hypothetical, imaginative, communication. It would follow from this that if we were under no pressure at all to communicate with others, we would not soliloquize. Now it is fair to assume that when we dream (as opposed to day-dreaming—which can take place at night in bed also—and related phenomena) we are sound asleep, i.e. not in a condition in which we can enter into a communicative relationship with anyone at all. Deep sleep unburdens us of the weight of the permanent possibility of communication. It would follow from this that when we are dreaming we do not soliloquize. The dream-thought "I am dreaming" which often occurs to us in a dream is not a piece of soliloquy. For if it *were* a piece of soliloquy, it would be possible, logically, for us to transform it forthwith into a communication. But the possibility of our being able to do this is *ex hypothesi* ruled out by the condition of deep sleep, which is also the condition of dreaming. This is why we are not able to ascribe our dream-experience to ourselves. But it does not follow from this fact that in dreaming we suffer no experiences. Being able to soliloquize is a condition of making our experience intelligible to ourselves, but it is not a condition, I am sure, of the possibility of experience as such. The notion of an unintelligible experience is

not a self-contradictory notion. To return to dreaming. We can say that, because of the absence of soliloquizing, dreaming constitutes an unintelligible experience. However, when we wake up from deep sleep, our capacity for soliloquizing is restored. We are then retrospectively able to cast our unintelligible dream-experience (of which we undeniably have memory-images) into an intelligible, soliloquized, narrative form. This does not of course enable us to say that at some point at night when we were fast sleep we were having so-and-so experiences in the sense that we could have ascribed these experiences to ourselves at the time of their occurrence. Dream-reports are, in this respect, quite different from ordinary memory-reports. What we can say is that it is only in the form of our dream-reports, and their soliloquized versions, that we can make our unintelligible deep-sleep experiences intelligible to ourselves and to others. I find myself able to say only the following by way of anything like a positive pronouncement about the nature of our dream-experiences : that they are a species of hallucinatory experiences which we suffer under a special handicap, viz. the handicap of a total, although temporary, loss of our capacity for soliloquizing, which is the same thing as our capacity for ascribing experiences to ourselves.

Postscript : In saying that dream-experiences are unintelligible to us at the time we suffer them, I do not wish to suggest that they are necessarily a medley of images or something like that. I do not wish to suggest this because, after all, even an experience of confusion is, in principle, self-ascribable. What I mean by saying that dream-experiences are unintelligible is that while we are dreaming we cannot seriously ask, or try to seriously answer, the question " What is going on ? " in relation to our dream-experiences. And experiences which resist interrogative scrutiny cannot be intelligible.

(V)

So far I have been concerned mainly with what might be called the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the

notion of selfconsciousness. But the notion of selfconsciousness also has a moral and political dimension. I shall now try to explore this region a bit.

I have said that being selfconscious is a matter of being able to adopt an audience-stance, actually or imaginatively, vis-a-vis an actual or an imagined speaker. How does one acquire these abilities? One is clearly not born with an operative ability to adopt an audience-stance vis-a-vis speakers. One is *cast* in the role of an audience by others, by one's parents, etc. This activity of casting an infant into the role of an audience—and thereby initiating the process of inducting him into a personal form of life—has morally significant features. You can only seek to cast an infant into the role of an audience by going on trying to "address" it, i.e. by going on trying to solicit, invite, a communicative response from it and not by interacting with it in a purely causal fashion. This being so, attempts to "address" an infant must be characterized by a *minimally caring* attitude towards it. Activity which is *less* caring than this would not be describable as an activity of trying to solicit, as opposed to trying to elicit, a communicative response from the infant. It would simply frustrate the infant, if not kill it off. The acquisition of communicative capacity, upon which the acquisition of personality is logically dependent, is thus the consequence of a *gift* from others, the gift of a minimally caring communicative attitude. Personality-acquisition is not even *in principle* a case of contractually acquiring something. This fact puts one, in so far as one is conscious of the fact that one is a person, under an obligation to *unconditionally* adopt a minimally caring communicative attitude towards anyone who adopts a minimally caring communicative attitude towards oneself. Thus the notion of selfconsciousness and the notion of an (unconditional) moral obligation towards (some) others are logically connected notions. The possibility of altruism is rooted in the nature of selfconsciousness.

But so is egoism rooted in the nature of selfconsciousness, if by egoism is meant an attitude of regarding oneself as valuable, and not simply an attitude of selfishness. How can this be shown in the light of the preceding discussion ? Consider the statement, say made by me, that I am not valuable in any sense at all. Now the making of this statement involves the thinking of the complex thought symbolized by the expression "I". I.e. it involves my imagining that I have taken up an audience-stance vis-a-vis an imagined speaker, i.e. that I am an object of an imagined person's minimal communicative care. But how can I imagine this if I don't value myself at all ! To this question I might reply : "I can't help imagining that I am an object of a minimally caring attitude, but I ought not to". But this will just not do, for this reply equally involves the thinking of the complex thought symbolized by the expression "I". I cannot *selfconsciously* deny that I have some value, because I cannot, selfconsciously, fail to cast myself in the role of an object of a minimally caring attitude. But this is a point in logic. Unqualified self-deprecation, mindless suicide, etc., are undertaken in disregard of this point. Acknowledgement of rationality and pursuit of blind passion are not, unfortunately, incompatible.

Before concluding this section, I would like to draw attention to two important consequences of the conclusion that men cannot help regarding themselves as being valuable in some sense or other. The first consequence is that the existence of such concepts as those of injury, damage, harm, pain, etc. in our conceptual system becomes easily explicable. If I cannot help regarding myself as being valuable in some sense or other, then I cannot also help regarding myself as being "vulnerable" in some sense or other. This connection between the notion of regarding oneself as being valuable and the notion of regarding oneself as being vulnerable can be seen more readily by reflecting upon the connection between the former notion and the notion of regarding oneself as being "precious" in some sense or other. Regarding myself as being

valuable (and in some sense " precious ") I must necessarily find in life actual or possible states of affairs which would be unacceptable to me. Words like " injury ", " harm ", " damage ", " pain ", etc. pick out such states of affairs. I am not suggesting that there must be some unique set of states of affairs which must be picked out by these words. What I am suggesting is that given that human beings necessarily regard themselves as being valuable in some sense or other, they must necessarily find in the world states of affairs—actual or possible—which they would find unacceptable, and that this is the general fact which explains our possession of such concepts of those of injury, harm, etc.

The second consequence of the fact that human beings cannot help regarding themselves as being valuable in some sense or other to which I wish to draw attention is that, given this fact, the " problem of evil "—familiar to students of the philosophy of religion—arises for the agnostic as well as the atheist, and not only for the theist. Regarding myself unavoidably as being valuable in some sense or other, I cannot acquiesce in a merely causal account of my suffering and agony and pain beyond a certain point. (Here I am thinking of human suffering which is *not* the result of man's inhumanity to man). But as an atheist or an agnostic, my protestations (regarding my suffering) would never be able to have an unambiguously literal force for me. But I would not, in logic, be able to refrain from protesting. It would always, *prima facie*, seem legitimate to me to ask the question " Why should I suffer so much ? " I do not know how this form of the problem of evil is going to be resolved. I merely mention it here as a logical consequence of the conclusion that human beings cannot fail to regard themselves as being valuable in some sense or other, and the fact that they suffer beyond endurance.

(VI)

I have said that the acquisition of personality, of communicative abilities, of selfconsciousness, is the consequence of the *gift*

of a minimally caring communicative attention on the part of others. Now these others need not be more than two or three persons. Also the labour that is required for the task of casting an infant in the role of a person is by no stretch of the imagination universal social labour. The acquisition of personality costs very little, it only requires a certain amount of love. It would follow from this that *the fact that I am a person* is not something which I owe to society at large. This is my ultimate theoretical safeguard against the tyranny of the crowd, the majority, *everybody*⁹. Now the facts of human language and personality acquisition may have been different, but the facts to which I have drawn attention in this connection belong to the category of those very very general conditions of human life, acknowledgement of the existence of which is a necessary condition of our ordinary thinking about the world and ourselves.

Granted that the fact that I am a person is not something which I owe to society at large, and so also granted that an anarchist attitude of rebellion against "mass society" has foundations in our condition, it still remains the case that for the full development of my personality, and for its sustenance throughout a life-time, I have to depend upon (increasingly) universal social labour—including the labour of past generations of human beings. This being so, I am also under a deep obligation to contribute my share towards the creation of an equalitarian society. Why an equalitarian society? This is because *qua* human beings, human beings value themselves in a sense in which it is absurd to speak of value-hierarchies. There is no *reason* for me to suppose that I can, in rational argument, convince another human being that he is, intrinsically, *less* valuable than myself. There is a notion of "regarding oneself as valuable" which is connected with the notion of "human personality" in such a way that there can only be an acknowledgement, and no grading, of the intrinsic worth of human beings: and this is only compatible with the ideal of an equalitarian society. This view is a secularization of the religious

theme that God values all men equally. To conclude this section : An anarchist attitude of rebelliousness against mass society is perfectly compatible with the socialist commitment to the task of creating an equalitarian society.

(VII)

I shall conclude this paper with some reflections on the notions of birth and death and their connection with the notion of self-consciousness.

I cannot conceive of my birth or death, nor, to put the matter slightly differently, do I possess concepts of *my birth* or *my death*. But don't I believe that I was born and that I shall die ? Indeed, I not only believe, I know this to be the case. But this is a piece of *general* knowledge which I possess about any member of the human species in which I cannot refuse to be included. I do not come to possess this knowledge by a process of enumeration of the births and deaths of human beings, but on the basis of direct observation as well as information—both scientific and lay—about the nature of a human being construed strictly under the category of “the other” or “the third person”. Under this category a human being is seen as an animal organism of a certain type, an entity of which it makes sense to say that at a certain time it “came into being, i.e. became operative as an animal organism of a certain kind”, and that at a certain time it will “cease to be, in the sense of ceasing to be operative as an animal organism of a certain type”. Now I cannot refuse to acknowledge that I am construable under the categories of “the other” and “the third person” by others, and so I cannot refuse to acknowledge the applicability of the above truths to myself. But I cannot *conceive* of myself as coming into being at a certain time and as something which will cease to be at a certain time. This is because I cannot conceive of myself as “the other”, or as “the third person”. Nor can I conceive of you, while I am seeing you as “the second person”, the recipient of my communicative

actions as well as the issuer of communicative utterances to me, as "the other" or as "the third person". "You" are the bare particular I must think of you as, and not any *sort* of creature, in order for me to be able to address you. And the thought "I", as thought by me, is my act of imagining myself to be a "you"—the recipient of an imagined speaker's act of addressing. Thus you and I are in the following predicament. We, as members of the human species, know that we were born and that we shall die. But as reciprocally related by the communicative relation, we *cannot* conceive of ourselves as having come into being, from nothing, at a certain time, and as being creatures who will cease to be at a certain time. We cannot help—logically cannot help—nursing the illusion of a beginningless and endless existence, but at the same time we cannot fly in the face of scientific as well as commonly observable facts as to the organic nature of oneself seen as "the other". I do not believe that this predicament can be dissolved by an increase in scientific knowledge. Of course, espousal of certain religious doctrines such as those of reincarnation or resurrection amounts to wishing away the predicament. . . But these religious doctrines bristle with insurmountable difficulties.

(VIII)

If what I have been saying about the notion of self-consciousness, and related notions, is at all sound, then there cannot exist what Stuart Hampshire commendatorily calls "the perfect secluar mind"¹⁰. But this does not land us in the lap of religion. The religious attitude, like the attitude of "the perfect secular mind", does not countenance the possibility that there might lie at the heart of the nature of human life an ineliminable sense of paradox.

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NOTES

1. An explanation of the quotation marks here is given later in the paper.
2. An explanation of the quotation marks here is given later in the paper.
3. An explanation of the quotation marks here is given later in the paper.
4. An explanation of the quotation marks here is given later in the paper.
5. Of course, even in the earlier case A would have to address B. Addressing is a necessary condition of communication. Here I am concentrating on A's act of addressing B for a special purpose.
6. Suppose the self is divisible into two selves. Can either sub-self address itself? The same question reappears.
7. If it did, would not the inviting self have to invite itself to invite the invited self? Infinite regress here.
8. Here, as well as in the other places in this paragraph where the word "thinking" occurs, I should like to qualify and say "thinking which is conducted in accordance with the logic of discourse".
9. In the "collective" sense of this expression.
10. *David Hume, A Symposium*, Macmillan, London, 1963, p. 9.