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Is There Any Difference Between the Words ‘I’ and ‘Phlogiston’?

1. We used to think, that when we utter the word ‘I’ in such sentences as ‘I love you’, by ‘I’ we mean our psychic activity center. However we live in the postmodern era, when the subject has already been dissolved in language and has been turned into a tool, by which language reproduce cultural senses. That is why the aforecited interpretation of the notion ‘I’ does not seem axiomatic and so we need to substantiate it. Thereby before speculating about the nature of I, we need first to defend that I is not only a word.

2. For doing this we will try to respond to the Daniel Dennett arguments, who adheres to the radical point of view, according to which I is just a Center of Narrative Gravity. The philosopher believes that although we used to call our-selves I, in fact there is no such thing as I, there are only “parallel, multitrack processes of interpretation and elaboration of sensory inputs”. Moreover due to Dennett, consciousness and self-consciousness emerged as a result of a language development and not vice versa. So he stands for self-consciousness but not for a real I. For him I is just a word which we use to describe a phenomenon, that does not exist.

3. May we confidently say that I is just a word? All in all, what is a word? It seems that when we call something by a word, we thus want to emphasize this something from the rest of the world because of its singularity or due to its properties that are also manifested in different objects. Namely we invent the word for the sense, which is significant to us and by this we fasten off this sense. Can we suggest that we may call something (by a word) which is actually does not exist?

4. Before XIXth century chemists operated with such a notion as ‘phlogiston’, implying a substance which, as it turned out later is not real. Does it mean that people can invent words that do not mean anything real? We do not think so. A chemist observes combustion and tries to explain this process. He knows *what* is occurring: wood is burning, but he does not know *how* it is occurring. That is why ‘phlogiston’ meant not only a non-existent entity, but also it had a sense of an actually observed phenomenon – combustion.

What do we know about our mind? We see how our thoughts and feelings emerge, we know we can think about something deliberately and that it is difficult to control our feelings. We know it is us who decided to do something. At every moment we know exactly that we are who we are, and not someone else. All these psychic activities do not exist just by themselves – they all have a common property – they are ours and we know about it. That is all that we have in mind by saying ‘I’, all those psychic activities and their centralization are real. So even if some of the senses we give to the notion ‘I’ are spare or wrong, most of the senses still exist and have a common property - they are ours.

5. Can a word functionally replace a phenomenon? It seems that it is possible only if the word is the phenomenon. For example to say ‘we promise’ means that we actually do it – we promise by uttering these words. So can the word ‘I’ replace I? Obviously it cannot: the word ‘I’ will not make a decision for us or could not be taken to prison for a crime. If I was an illusion, a person could not become a moral agent. It seems that a person is free by virtue of understanding that he or she can do everything a man can commit in principle. That is – such a person is aware of the extent of their responsibility to the world and other people and has a free will to do as it seems fit. However if there is no a decision-making center and no real I, it is not clear what is responsible for a murder: a desire to kill, anger, a striking hand or chemical reactions in a brain?

6. Thus we tried to show that I is not only a word, and that by using it we mean some real phenomena which we give a sense and isolate from the outer world because of their common property – they are ours. Besides our mind has a mental center (not literary) for if there were only “parallel, multitrack processes” a person could not focus or reflect on anything because there would be no one to focus and reflect.