

Style: should Kripke have avoided “I” in his academic writing?

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. This brief paper considers what to say about someone who responds to Saul Kripke’s writing by saying, “He uses ‘I’. That sounds subjective.” What to say about such an inference?! The main response I offer is that philosophy is partly about challenging, not encouraging, mistaken inferences.

Draft version: Version 1 (October 24th 2022).

In the beginning

No one was passing the exam

Then we grade inflated and the world began

Saul Kripke did not just have ideas. He also wrote! He was and surely will be evaluated by some readers as a stylist. What evaluation can he expect? I find the lectures are written in a readable way in *Naming and Necessity*. I don’t know if they count as literature in a prestigious sense of the word. I take some aesthetic satisfaction from the conditions specifying the cluster version of the descriptivist theory of names (1980: 71). I suppose it is like the peculiar satisfactions of some medical or legal language. There are the caves of literature as well as the capital city!

Anyway, I wish to focus on another stylistic issue. Have you ever encountered this advice for academic writing: not to use “I” because it sounds subjective? But here is a paragraph from Kripke’s lecture 1:

It would be nice to answer all of these arguments. I am not entirely able to see my way clear through every problem of this sort that can be raised. Furthermore, I'm pretty sure that I won't have time to discuss all these questions in these lectures. Nevertheless, I think it's pretty certain that the view of Frege and Russell is false. (1980: 29)

Let's focus on this last sentence. I imagine a certain character. She says, beginning with a quotation, “ ‘*I think* it's pretty certain’ – that sounds really subjective, like it's just his opinion.” Would it sound “better” if Kripke had said, “The author offers strong arguments that Frege and Russell's view is false,” or “This text puts forward arguments which aim to disprove Frege and Russell's view”?

A response to the demand for such stylistic revisions is this: philosophy is at least partly about challenging mistaken inferences and to make the suggested changes would be to be stylistically ruled by such inferences, more specifically to be ruled by:

If an author says “I think...” then what he or she presents is not knowledge.

If the content of the text is almost identical, it is just that the framing is subtly different to avoid the use of “I,” then it would be a mistaken inference to conclude “Now it's objective.” The various tricks to avoid “I,” such as using “We” or “The author,” cannot in themselves possibly produce a change from subjective to objective, at least where “subjective” means just your opinion and lacking the status of knowledge. You can use those tricks, but it would defeat an aim of philosophy to make those changes in response to the critic described.

(Going further back than Kripke: I wonder what the person who recommends not using “I” would make of Descartes' use of “I am thinking” as the proposition he is most certain of!)

References

Descartes, R. (translated and edited by J. Cottingham) 1996 (originally 1642). *Meditations on First Philosophy, with Selections from the Objections and Replies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kripke, S.A. 1980 (originally 1972). *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.