

## *Immunity to Error through Misidentification*

EDITED BY SIMON PROSSER AND FRANÇOIS RECANATI  
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The concept of immunity to error through misidentification (hereafter ‘IEM’) is commonly traced to Wittgenstein and sometimes further back to Kant, but it received its characteristic formulations in the work of Sydney Shoemaker and Gareth Evans. Put roughly (and we will see soon why it is hard to do better than this), a singular judgement of the form ‘*Fa*’ is immune to error through misidentification iff it is impossible for it to be false *only* because the subject has wrongly identified *a* as the thing that is *F*. This phenomenon has often been seen as a clue to the nature of singular thought and the connections between self-consciousness and reference *de se*, and the essays in this volume explore these possibilities.

A virtue of the book is that the essays treat IEM in many different ways and with a wide range of ends. This also poses a challenge, however: there is no prefatory chapter that systematizes the essays or charts the authors’ agreements and disagreements with one another, and – with the exception of the essays by Recanati and Crispin Wright, which I will discuss below – the contributors generally proceed in isolation from one another, even when their positions conflict. Especially given the frequent disagreements and the difficulty of seeing any way to resolve them, one general worry that emerges from these diverse treatments is that there may be no *unitary* phenomenon of IEM for philosophers to understand, as the concept of IEM encompasses a group of phenomena that have some features in common but are insufficiently homogeneous to work cooperatively in any general account of self-consciousness or singular thought.

To make this worry vivid, consider some of the familiar examples that appear in the literature on IEM. These can be placed roughly into three categories:

UNCONTROVERSIALLY IEM	CONTROVERSIAL	UNCONTROVERSIALLY NOT IEM
‘I have a headache’, based on inner sensations	‘I was in Rome in June’, based on my memory of having been there	‘Vashti is in the park’, based on seeing someone who looks like her
‘I want a milkshake’, made on whatever basis I normally know my desires	‘My arm is rising’, based on perception of my body ‘from within’	‘I have won the lottery’, based on hearing the winning numbers and reading the ticket in my hand
‘This is an apple’, based on visual perception	‘My legs are crossed’, based on visual perception of my legs	‘I have made a mess’, based on the sight of spilled milk

How can we sort out the examples in the middle column? As the essays in this volume show, accounts of IEM that agree about the right- and left-hand columns may still treat the controversial cases differently: to give one example, Peacocke and Frédérique de Vignemont follow Evans (1982) in arguing that some visually-based self-ascriptions of physical properties may be IEM, but none of the other authors appear sympathetic to this idea. Moreover, the recent literature has distinguished several different *kinds* of IEM, including Shoemaker’s (1986) distinction between *logical* and *de facto* IEM, James Pryor’s (1999) distinction between *which-object*-misidentification and *de re*-misidentification, and Annalisa Coliva’s (2006) distinction between IEM relative to the background presuppositions of a judgement and IEM relative to the subject’s own grounds, and the cases in the middle column will be evaluated differently depending on which kind of IEM one is concerned with. (I will supply an example of this below.) Finally, any attempt at a deeper explanation of IEM is bound to be coloured by what one wants such an explanation to *do*: is it part of a general theory of singular reference, an argument that there are no selves at all, a Cartesian account of the transparency of the mental, a Strawsonian theory of persons as material entities possessing psychological properties? Depending on which project one goes in for, certain accounts of IEM will be better suited than others; and since all these projects seem *prima facie* intelligible, so do the associated ways of understanding IEM.

An example of this difficulty appears in the essays by Recanati and Wright. On Recanati’s account, a first-person judgement is immune to error through misidentification whenever it is based on a ‘mode’ of

experience whose nature ensures that it can provide information only about oneself: thus for example, Recanati holds that in judging the position of *my* body on the basis of a proprioceptive experience I am immune to error concerning the person whose body I am aware of, as the intrinsically first-personal nature of proprioception ensures that in making this judgement I have not needed to *identify myself* at all. Against this account, Wright argues that since the judgement ‘My legs are crossed’ *presupposes* that the experience at its basis derives from the position of my legs rather than someone else’s, therefore it rests on an identification, and thus he concludes that the scope of IEM for ‘I’-thoughts is limited to psychological avowals and the self-ascription of sensations.

But there is a natural reply to this objection. Following Coliva, Wright himself distinguishes a judgement’s *presupposing* an identification from the way an identification can be among *the subject’s own grounds* for judging as he does. Corresponding to these concepts are two distinct characterizations of IEM: as holding of a judgement iff it does not presuppose an identification at all, and as holding of a judgement iff an identification is not among the subject’s grounds for it. If Recanati’s overall account is right, then many self-ascriptions of physical properties may be immune to error through misidentification in the latter sense but not the former. But which characterization we prefer will be determined largely by our broader project: if it is primarily epistemological, we may prefer the characterization in terms of presuppositions; whereas if we are concerned to understand the cognitive structure of self-reference, then a focus on subjective grounds recommends itself. Moreover, even within the context of a given project there may still be no way to say which characterization identifies the ‘true nature’ of IEM. This does not mean that discussion of IEM is useless, of course – each paper in this volume proves otherwise. But it does suggest that disagreements over the proper understanding of IEM are often proxies for more fundamental disagreements that differing accounts of IEM presuppose, and are unequipped to settle on their own.

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