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The Three Bindings of the "I" and the Direction of Philosophical Consolation

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Abstract. This article re-examines the object of "philosophical comfort" from the perspective of linguistic philosophy. The article proposes that the suffering "I" is composed of three constraints: language constraints make the "I" a grammatical position rather than an entity; Social constraints are imposed through the expectation of rewards and punishments based on one's role. Oedipus is recognized as a "puzzle solver" and falls from the same position without justification; Natural constraints stem from the limitations of the body, and its living conditions are not set by him, so it is impossible to demand a single responsible 'me'. In this regard, the Stoics tightened the self by distinguishing between "dependent on us" and "not dependent on us", but required the assumption of a continuous self to perform regulation, reintroducing the dismantled hypothesis; Spinoza sees the self as a pattern in the natural order, while Confucius sees the self as a node in the network of relationships. This article argues that neither direction eliminates pain, but changes the shape of the demand - no longer requiring a complete body to be responsible for things that no one can control; Restraint is an artificial arrangement that can be rearranged. What remains is not self-repair, but relaxation of the claims made in the name of the self, and the pain remains in place.

Keywords: Linguistic Binding, Dilution of the Self, Philosophical Consolation

1. Introduction

Nearly everything people say about suffering puts "I" in the subject position. I failed. I lost something. I was humiliated. The grammar is so habitual it passes unnoticed. Yet philosophy of language has spent a century making that subject harder to take for granted. On the Saussurean picture, the sign does not answer to a thing in the world; it answers to other signs. If that is right, "I" is less a name for something than a position in an utterance. Which leaves an awkward question over the whole business of consolation: who is suffering, and who exactly is philosophy supposed to be comforting?

What makes the question awkward is that it has not really been asked. The literature on philosophical consolation is largely Stoic in inspiration. Hadot's work on ancient philosophy as a spiritual exercise [1]. He assumed a self that has attached itself to the wrong things and can be retrained. Work on personal identity runs alongside this but worries about something else. Strawson asked what has to be true for us to speak of the same person over time [2]. Schechtman has asked what makes a life narratively one person's [3]. Neither is trying to comfort anyone. Angle, who has

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made available to English-language philosophy, does treat the self as constituted by its relations, but usually presses the point about ethics or politics, not about what to do with suffering [4]. So the three bodies of work that ought to converge here mostly pass each other by. None treats the instability of the "I" as the problem consolation has to solve.

Philosophy rarely takes pain away. What it can do is loosen the grip of one particular thought: that there must be a single, continuous "I" standing behind the pain and answerable for it. This paper uses Oedipus to try this on, because in his case nothing can be undone and the demand to locate one responsible "I" is at its most brutal.

2. Three bindings

If the "I" is really nothing more than a slot in language, then the suffering that seems to belong to it has to be explained by something other than the "I" itself. This paper suggests that there are three bindings doing this work, and that they operate in sequence: the linguistic one first, then the social one, and then, underneath both, the plain fact of having a body at all.

2.1. Linguistic binding

The linguistic binding is the easiest to state. Take an ordinary sentence: "I am suffering," or "I have lost my child," or "I was humiliated." In every one of them, "I" sits in the subject position, and anyone listening takes it for granted that the word picks something out. Saussure's treatment of the sign is what puts pressure on that assumption, because on his account a sign gets its identity from its relations to other signs rather than from any object it stands for [5]. "I" therefore begins to look less like the name of a private substance and more like a place in a structure. Benveniste sharpened the point when he argued that the personal pronouns are shifters, their reference supplied afresh by each occasion of use, so that every utterance of "I" is a new event rather than a repetition of an old one [6].

It is worth pausing on what this does to Oedipus, since his case turns out to be instructive in a way he certainly did not intend. The "I" who says "I solved the riddle of the Sphinx" and the "I" who says "I have committed patricide and incest" are, in his own speech, the same pronoun, and the play runs on his assumption that this grammatical identity is also a metaphysical one: that there is one continuous self who did the solving and the killing and can therefore be made to answer for both. Nothing in his life supports the assumption. It is fanciful to read the self-blinding as a response to exactly this gap, since what he destroys is the organ that would have had to see the unity, and there is no unity there to be seen.

Conceding the point about pronouns, however, does not by itself stop the search for an essence. Grammatical habit is stronger than argument, and Wittgenstein is the writer who has been most patient about why. He describes philosophy as "a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language" [7]. He observes that someone who says "I am in pain" is not thereby pointing to a person who is in pain [7]. The bewitchment, put roughly, is the assumption that a noun must have a bearer, that because English contains the word "I" there is a thing for it to name. Oedipus is bewitched in just this way. The point is not the familiar one, that his question goes unanswered. It is that "Who am I?" is the wrong shape of question, and that it takes that shape from a mistaken picture of how words work. This does not yet tell us who is suffering or what consolation should address; it only tells us that the question cannot be answered by locating a single bearer behind the pronoun. The remaining two bindings are what fill that gap.

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2.2. Social binding

The social binding takes over where the linguistic one leaves off, and it decides which "I"s are rewarded and which are punished. It begins doing this long before anyone has asked it to. A child, an employee, a friend: each role arrives with expectations already attached, and when the expectations go unmet, what is damaged is the identity rather than the action.

People tolerate it because the alternative is worse. Fromm's argument in Escape from Freedom is that the burden of freedom frightens people badly enough that they will accept almost any structure on offer, whether a job or a party or a moral majority, rather than ask who they are without one [8]. The thing that holds a person up is, as he presents it, the same thing that holds her down.

Oedipus is where the arrangement shows its teeth. Thebes needed him to be the king who solved the riddle, and the plague was then read as evidence that the king was concealing something. The position that earned him his recognition is what makes the fall unanswerable. He does not simply lose a role, because the role turns inside out and the savior is revealed as the criminal. The binding is still in place. Only its charge has changed.

2.3. Natural binding

Underneath both sits the third binding, and no rearrangement of roles will get around it, because it is the body's. Energy, attention and time: a person has finite amounts of each, and biology declines to let a dozen assigned roles be played at once. From the inside the "I" looks endlessly adjustable; from the outside it is a small and dwindling thing, which is a disagreeable way to discover it. Here Oedipus is the case at full stretch. The city wants a king, a husband, a detective and a penitent, and what he has is one body, a limited supply of energy, and access to whatever information has happened to reach him. He did not choose the mountain he was abandoned on as an infant, nor the parents who raised him in Corinth, and he had no way of knowing who the man at the crossroads was or who the queen was. None of the conditions of his life were set by him. This is what makes the demand for a single responsible "I" impossible rather than merely unjust: the third binding removes the ground the other two are standing on.

Put them together, and you have something close to a knot, in which language abducts a changing individual to a fixed sign, society loads the sign with rewards and punishments, and the body guarantees that whoever is carrying it cannot manage the weight. What results is a person expected to answer, entirely and in one piece, for things that nobody in that position could have controlled.

The obvious objection is that this is a counsel of despair, and that the bindings are doing necessary work, since without them there would be no responsibility and no recognition and no social life at all, only a thin scatter of unowned events. The objection has real force, and I do not want to wave it away. What is being claimed here is not that the bindings ought to be cut. It is that they are arrangements, made by people and remade by people, and can therefore be handled otherwise than they currently are.

3. Tightening or diluting

"I" has been presented as something tied down rather than something given, and the natural next question is what philosophy can actually do about that. The tradition supplies two families of answers, and it may be worth noticing at once that they do not differ only in how far they go. They differ in the direction in which they move.

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3.1. Stoicism and the limits of self-control

The better-known of the two comes from the Stoics. Epictetus puts it compactly: it is not events that disturb people but their judgments about events [9]. The work of philosophy is therefore to sort out what is up to us from what is not, and to stop treating the second as though it were the first. Applied to Oedipus, the effect is a change in the form of the question rather than in its answer. "Who am I?" gives way to something like "how should I respond to what has already happened," and "I am a criminal" becomes the claim that something terrible happened and that its causes lay partly outside him. This is a genuine subtraction of weight. The story of Zeno of Citium, who is said to have taken to philosophy after a shipwreck cost him his library, is told in exactly this spirit.

The difficulty is that self-control has a limit, and the limit is the self it takes for granted. In order to regulate one's judgments there must be someone doing the regulating, and that someone has to remain sufficiently continuous to finish the job. If the "I" is only a position in language, as the preceding section argued, then it is not obvious who is doing the regulating. The Stoic position quietly reinstates the assumption that the earlier part of this essay was busy dislodging.

A second difficulty is less often noticed. Self-control operates entirely within the frame of the "I", adjusting the relation between self and world without asking whether the frame is itself part of what is causing the trouble. Worse, it adds a task. Having sorted what is up to us from what is not, the individual now has to go on monitoring which of his judgments falls into which column, and this has to be done continuously, which is a large price for a modest reduction in suffering. Zeno got a philosophy out of the shipwreck, and he also got a permanent appointment to watch himself. That is not nothing, and it is also not freedom.

3.2. Spinoza: the self as a mode of nature

Spinoza proceeds in the opposite direction and from a different premise. On his account, a finite thing is not a substance but a mode, which is to say that it exists only as an expression of an attribute and therefore only in company with the whole of which it is an expression [10]. The figure he uses himself is not the one usually borrowed on his behalf. In the letter to Oldenburg of November 1665 he asks us to imagine a worm living in the blood, which takes every drop of blood to be a whole in itself rather than a part, and so misjudges its position by the standards of the organism it inhabits. What the worm gets wrong is its perspective rather than its substance, since it treats as self-standing a region that only has standing in relation to the rest. Applied to Oedipus, this makes the man a resident of the blood rather than an independent agent, granted his conditions and his force by the order he sits inside and eventually spent. It is the first dilution. What matters is not that the "I" ceases to cause and to suffer. It is that neither of these is any longer its solitary responsibility.

The contrast with Stoicism is usually stated too neatly, as though the two were competing answers to one question. It is closer to say that they answer rather different questions and turn out to be useful against the same complaint. The Stoic asks what can be governed, and settles for a smaller domain of freedom inside a self that stays intact. Spinoza asks what the self belongs to, and arrives at his result by giving up the self in precisely the sense in which the Stoic needed it kept. There is a real philosophical disagreement between them, and it is not settled here. For the present purpose the difference in direction matters more than the difference in degree.

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3.3. Confucius: the self as a node of relations

The second dilution is relational rather than natural. In the Analects, the "I" is never described as a thing that stands alone first and is later surrounded by relationships; it is described as something that comes to be itself inside them. This is why the character for benevolence, ren, is written with the radical for a person together with the mark for two, since a person is not a person at all until there is a second person there [11]. The question therefore stops being "Who am I?" and becomes something closer to "what should I do, given the people I am answerable to?" Confucius does not propose dissolving the bindings described in the preceding section. He separates them instead. Some constrain, in the sense that they limit what a person may do, and others cultivate, in the sense that they are the conditions under which a life becomes worth living. To be a child, a friend, a ruler or a citizen is to be tied to others by obligation and by care, and these ties make one thoroughly vulnerable, which is exactly why they are also what make a life meaningful rather than merely survivable.

The Confucian consolation looks less like an answer to Oedipus' question than a refusal of its shape. He would not stay inside "Who am I?", and would turn it toward what ought to be done. Oedipus can be a good king or an innocent child, though he cannot be all of those at once. Benevolence, on this reading, is not a matter of denying what has been done. It is a matter of answering for what can still be answered, and it leaves the earlier guilt where it was.

Spinoza and Confucius disagree about most things, and there is no reason to suppose that the unity of nature and the network of relations are the same claim in different words. They converge on one point, though, and it is the point this essay needs. When the "I" is bound as an isolated thing, suffering concentrates on it and becomes unmanageable, and the concentration is itself the problem rather than the bare fact of pain. When the "I" is loosened and set inside a larger order, the same suffering is distributed, and it no longer has to carry its whole weight by itself. Oedipus may come to see that he was never the isolated agent required to bear an absolute amount of guilt. He belonged to an order first, and to a set of relations before that, and none of these judged him, which is a different thing from saying that nothing did.

4. Conclusion

The question this paper began with turns out not to be about how suffering is to be borne, since what it turns on is who is meant to be bearing it, and whom philosophy takes itself to be addressing when it offers comfort at all.

The three bindings bear on this directly. The "I" behind the pain is a position, assigned by language before its holder can refuse it, charged with consequences by everyone around it, and lodged in a body that will not last. Consolation has no substance there to hand back to itself.

Stoicism works on whatever does the regulating and tightens it; Spinoza and the Confucians work on the thing regulated, dissolving it into the order it belongs to and the relations it answers to. Neither takes the pain away, and neither text claims to. What changes is the shape of the demand. Oedipus, whose name is usually said to come from the feet that were pinned together, is not asked to answer in one piece for what no one in his position could have controlled.

Cutting the bindings would leave nothing to be responsible for and no one to do the recognising. They are arrangements, though, made and unmade by people over time, and what has been arranged once can be arranged differently.

What is left is a loosening of the claim made on a self's behalf, which is a different thing from repairing the self. Whether that amounts to comfort is not settled here. It is at least aimed at the

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question that was actually asked. The pain stays where it was.

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