Which-Object Misidentification

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Abstract
This paper examines the relation between de re and which-object misidentification. I argue that the most natural reading of which-object misidentification, according to which the two kinds of error are mutually exclusive, is inconsistent with Pryor’s claim that immunity to which-object misidentification implies immunity to de re misidentification. My argument undermines Pryor’s strategy to focus his discussion of error through misidentification on which-object misidentification and raises more general issues concerning the nature of introspective grounds.

A belief of the form ‘a is F’ is immune to error through misidentification when it cannot be wrong with respect to the question who or what instantiates (or seems to instantiate) the property in question. For instance, if I believe that I am seeing a canary, based on my visual impression as of a canary in front of me, I may be wrong in many respects, but I cannot be wrong about it being me who is (or seems to be) seeing a canary (cf. Shoemaker 1968: 557). While the exact definition of immunity to error through misidentification is disputed, many authors support the claim that introspection-based self-ascriptions of mental states are so immune (loci classici: Wittgenstein 1958, Shoemaker 1968, Evans 1982). Further, I-thoughts which are so immune are generally taken to be fundamental to self-consciousness.

In his seminal (1999) paper, James Pryor distinguishes two varieties of error through misidentification, de re misidentification and which-object misidentification, and two corresponding varieties of immunity to error through misidentification. This paper examines the relations between both de re and which-object misidentification as well as between the two corresponding varieties of immunity. I argue that the most natural reading of which-object misidentification, according to which the two kinds of error are mutually exclusive, is inconsistent with Pryor’s claim that immunity to which-object misidentification implies immunity to de re misidentification.

1 Two Notions of Misidentification
The standard case of misidentification is de re misidentification. One of Pryor’s paradigmatic cases of error through de re misidentification is this.

[SAM THE GUN] I see that the blue-coated man is carrying a gun under his coat. Because I’ve misidentified the blue-coated man as Sam, I form the de re belief, of Sam, that he is carrying a gun. (275)

1 All references are to Pryor (1999), unless otherwise noted.
The belief ‘Sam is carrying a gun’ is in error through de re misidentification because its justification rests on justification for the identity belief ‘the blue-coated man = Sam’. Generally, a belief of the form ‘a is F’ is in error through de re misidentification iff its justification rests on justification for a false identity belief of the form ‘a = b’, where ‘a’ and ‘b’ are singular de re concepts.

Pryor pointed out that there is another kind of misidentification which he labelled which-object misidentification. Here is his well-known example.

[SKUNK] I smell a skunky odor, and see several animals rummaging around in my garden. None of them has the characteristic white stripes of a skunk, but I believe that some skunks lack these stripes. Approaching closer and sniffing, I form the belief, of the smallest of these animals, that it is a skunk in my garden. This belief is mistaken. There are several skunks in my garden, but none of them is the small animal I see. (281)

In this case, justification for the belief ‘this animal is a skunk in my garden’ does not rest on justification for an identity belief containing two de re concepts. Rather, the subject moves from justification for an existential belief (‘there is a skunk in my garden’) to a singular belief. So, in cases of which-object misidentification, the subject believes a property to be instantiated by something or other, and then goes wrong in singling out who or what is the witness of that property.

To repeat, in de re misidentification, justification for the singular belief ‘a is F’ rests on justification for the singular belief ‘b is F’ and justification for the false identity belief ‘a = b’; in which-object misidentification, justification for the singular belief ‘a is F’ rests on justification for the existential belief ‘something is F’ and justification for believing that a’s being F is, so to speak, the relevant truthmaker of that existential belief. In cases of de re misidentification, the subject’s justification for believing the property to be instantiated allows her to entertain a singular de re thought about the bearer of the property (e.g. ‘the blue-coated man is carrying a gun’). In cases of which-object misidentification, the subject’s initial justification for believing the property to be instantiated does not yet allow her to entertain a de re thought about the bearer of the property, but only an existential thought (e.g. ‘there is a skunk in my garden’).

It will ease exposition to distinguish two notions of identification which correspond to the two notions of misidentification (cf. Lafraire 2013). A belief is based on de re identification iff its justification rests on justification for an identity belief ‘a = b’, where ‘a’ and ‘b’ are de re concepts; a belief is based on singling-out identification iff its justification involves justification for the move from an existential belief to a singular de re belief (where justification for the existential belief does not yet allow the subject to entertain a de re belief).

Some authors have questioned Pryor’s distinction or its usefulness, and have proposed alternative distinctions.2 I am not going into that. Let us assume that there is an interesting difference between cases like SAM THE GUN and SKUNK which can be captured by Pryor’s distinction.

2 Coliva (2006) argues that the distinction does not reveal a difference in the structure of the grounds, but a difference in the nature of the concepts involved. Recanati (2012) proposes to distinguish between misidentification based on singular grounds and misidentification based on general grounds. Wright (2012) defends Pryor’s distinction, and Smith (2006) criticizes the general idea that there are two kinds of immunity.
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tification mutually exclusive. It assumes that which-object misidentification necessarily involves a singling-out identification, i.e. a move from justification for an existential belief only, to a singular de re belief. I dub this the disjunctive reading. As I will show, the disjunctive reading is inconsistent with Pryor’s claim that immunity to which-object misidentification implies immunity to de re misidentification. Before I make this point, let me establish that the disjunctive reading gets the notion of which-object misidentification right.

First, in describing which-object misidentification, and in particular in contrasting it to de re misidentification, Pryor makes several remarks that strongly suggest the disjunctive reading. For instance, he contrasts the singling-out identification in which-object misidentification with reidentification in de re misidentification:

In cases of de re misidentification, I form a mistaken belief of a that it is F, and my epistemic right to this belief rests on my justification for believing, of some particular object y, that y is F and that a and y are the same object. […] In cases of wb-misidentification, I also form a mistaken belief of a that it is F, but here my epistemic right to that belief does not rest on my justification for believing, of any other object, that it is F. In cases of wb-misidentification, I go wrong not in reidentifying the thing I know to be F as some other thing; rather, I go wrong in figuring out which thing is F, in the first place. (282 f.)

Second, Pryor explicitly claims that the two kinds of misidentification can occur independently of one another: “Which-misidentification can occur without de re misidentification. […] And de re misidentification can occur without which-misidentification” (285). The first claim is beyond question: cases like Skunk involve which-object misidentification but no de re misidentification. It is the second claim that is under discussion in this paper. Strictly speaking, this claim does not imply the disjunctive reading, for this claim is also compatible with a reading that takes which-object misidentification and de re misidentification to simply be logically independent. However, as will become clear shortly, the relevant alternative reading holds that any case of de re misidentification is also a case of which-object misidentification. The quoted passage supports the disjunctive reading in ruling out this alternative.

Third, attributing the disjunctive reading to Pryor is consistent with the literature. For instance, Lafraire explicitly claims that there can be cases of de re misidentification that do not involve which-object misidentification (cf. 2013: 51 f.).³ The disjunctive reading is arguably also implied by Wright, who writes that in cases of which-object misidentification “a thinker goes into a situation equipped with grounds for a unique existential claim” (2012: 255). Even more explicitly, Prosser states that “[i]n cases of wb-misidentification […] there are no genuine grounds for any de re judgment of the form ‘b is F’, but at most genuine grounds for a judgment of the form ∃x Fx” (2012: 161).

Thus, it has been shown that the notion of which-object misidentification is best construed in its disjunctive reading. However, I should note that the disjunctive reading is inconsistent with Pryor’s explicit definition. To wit, Pryor’s definition implies that any case of de re misidentification is ipso facto a case of which-object misidentification. This obviously contradicts the disjunctive reading. However, I take this to be a mere lapse. Let me quickly set the definition straight, as this will also provide the necessary background for the ensuing discussion. Here are the original definitions in full.

³Again, this supports the disjunctive reading in ruling out the relevant alternative.
De re misidentification occurs when:

\[d^1\] There is some singular proposition about \(x\), to the effect that it is \(F\), that a subject believes or attempts to express. [\ldots]

\[d^{ii}\] The subject’s justification for believing this singular proposition rests on his justification for believing, of some \(y\), and of \(x\), that \(y\) is \(F\) and that \(y\) is identical to \(x\). [\ldots]

\[d^{iii}\] However, unbeknownst to the subject, \(y \neq x\). (274 f.)

Wh-misidentification occurs when:

\[wh^1\] A subject has some grounds \(G\) that offer him knowledge of the existential generalization \(\exists x\ Fx\).

\[wh^{ii}\] Partly on the basis of \(G\), the subject is also justified, or takes himself to be justified, in believing of some object \(a\) that it is \(F\).

\[wh^{iii}\] But in fact \(a\) is not \(F\). Some distinct object (or objects) \(y\) is \(F\), and it’s because the grounds \(G\) “derive” in the right way from this fact about \(y\) that they offer the subject knowledge that \(\exists x\ Fx\). (282)

Now, how is which-object misidentification implied in cases of de re misidentification? Consider Sam the gun. Pryor takes this to be an example of de re misidentification that does not involve which-object misidentification (cf. 285). His idea must be that since there is no singling-out identification, there is no which-object misidentification. But in fact, no singling-out identification is required by Pryor’s definition of which-object misidentification. Indeed, Sam the gun does, pace Pryor, satisfy the criteria of which-object misidentification.

Criterion (wh\(^1\)) is satisfied since I clearly have grounds that offer me knowledge of the existential generalization that someone is carrying a gun. Note that for the criterion to be fulfilled I need not actually entertain the existential belief (cf. 281), but only need grounds that would justify me in believing the existential claim. Criterion (wh\(^{ii}\)) is equally satisfied since it is partly on the basis of \(G\) (my visual impression of the blue-coated man carrying a gun) that I take myself to be justified in believing of Sam that he is carrying a gun. Finally, criterion (wh\(^{iii}\)) is satisfied since, first, it is not in fact Sam, but the blue-coated man, who is carrying a gun, and, second, it is because my visual impression derives in the right way from this fact about the blue-coated man that it offers me knowledge of the existential claim that someone is carrying a gun.

These considerations are not specific to the case. When a subject has grounds for knowledge that a particular object is \(F\), as in cases of de re misidentification, then the subject ipso facto has grounds for knowledge of the existential belief that someone or something is \(F\). Any case of de re misidentification will also satisfy the criteria for which-object misidentification. Put simply, the definition fails to restrict its scope to cases involving a mistaken singling-out identification. Therefore, if we take the definitions literally, de re misidentification implies which-object misidentification.

Of course, there is an easy fix for this. All we need to do is add to (wh\(^1\)) the clause that grounds \(G\) offer knowledge for an existential belief only (i.e. they do not yet offer knowledge for a de re belief). With this amendment, the kinds of grounds we find in cases of de re misidentification allows for error through misidentification to be compatible with (a) error through misprediction, and (b) accidentally true belief. I think that these differences are inadvertent, but in any case they are not relevant to the issue under discussion.

\(^4\)Actually, that is not quite correct. There are two further differences between the definitions. Only the definition of de re misidentification allows for error through misidentification to be compatible with (a) error through misprediction, and (b) accidentally true belief. I think that these differences are inadvertent, but in any case they are not relevant to the issue under discussion.
misidentification do not satisfy (wh) and hence these cases are not in error through which-object misidentification. In what follows, I am assuming that the amended definition is the one Pryor had in mind.

3 Immunity to Which-Object Misidentification

According to the disjunctive reading, which-object misidentification and de re misidentification are mutually exclusive categories. This has direct implications for the relation between the corresponding varieties of immunity. I now show that the disjunctive notion of which-object misidentification is inconsistent with Pryor’s claim that which-immunity implies de re immunity:

(whide) Immunity to error through which-object misidentification implies immunity to error through de re misidentification.

Consider Pryor’s illustration of (whide). He claims, contraposing (whide), that “any beliefs which are vulnerable to de re misidentification when justified by certain grounds are ipso facto also vulnerable to which-misidentification when justified by those grounds” (285). As an example he claims that, “in [Sam the gun], where my belief of Sam that he is carrying a gun exemplifies de re misidentification, this belief must therefore also be vulnerable to which-misidentification, when believed on the grounds described in the example” (285). Now, Sam the gun is a paradigm example of de re misidentification. Pryor further claims that this case does not involve which-object misidentification (cf. 285). How, then, is this case vulnerable to which-object misidentification in virtue of being in error through de re misidentification?

What are the grounds in Sam the gun? The justification for the belief ‘Sam is carrying a gun’ is based on justification for believing ‘the blue coated man is carrying a gun’ and justification for believing ‘the blue coated man = Sam’. But if these are the grounds, then we should expect that, on the disjunctive reading, the belief is immune to error through which-object misidentification. For, on the disjunctive reading, a belief is in error through which-object misidentification only if it involves a false singling-out identification. But the grounds in Sam the gun do not contain a singling-out identification, only a de re identification. If the case involves any misidentification at all it must be a de re misidentification, given its grounds.

This is a general point. Any case of de re misidentification will involve grounds that contain a false de re identification. But on the disjunctive reading, a belief cannot be vulnerable to error through which-object misidentification in virtue of being based on a de re identification, for de re misidentification and which-object misidentification are mutually exclusive. Rather, cases of de re misidentification are immune to which-object misidentification, because the grounds of the belief do not contain a singling-out identification.\(^5\)

A different way of making the same point is this. Given the amended definition of which-object misidentification, a judgment is in which-object misidentification only if it is based on identity-neutral grounds (cf. Coliva 2006: 411). That is to say, for a judgment to be in which-object misidentification its justification must be partially based on grounds that allow for an existential claim only. However, cases of de re misidentification precisely do not involve

\(^5\)More precisely, this only holds for regular cases of de re misidentification. There may of course be beliefs that involve both kinds of misidentification. Suppose, for instance, that I have justification for believing that someone or other called my name, go wrong in singling out this man demonstratively as the one who called, and make a further mistake in believing of this man that he is Sam. My eventual belief that Sam called my name would then be both in error through which-object misidentification (singling out that man) and in error through de re misidentification (taking this man to be Sam). However, the belief’s vulnerability to which-object misidentification is independent of the belief’s being in error through de re misidentification. In regular cases of de re misidentification, like Sam the gun, the grounds do not involve a singling-out identification and are hence immune to which-object misidentification.
identity-neutral grounds, but grounds that allow for a \textit{de re} judgment. Hence contrary to Pryor’s claim, immunity to which-object misidentification does not imply immunity to \textit{de re} misidentification.

## 4 Implications

I argued that Pryor’s notion of which-object misidentification, according to which \textit{de re} misidentification and which-object misidentification are mutually exclusive categories, is inconsistent with his claim that which-immunity implies \textit{de re} immunity. I finish by pointing out the broader philosophical import of my discussion.

To begin with, let me quickly set an exegetical issue straight. Pryor argues that both Wittgenstein and Shoemaker are best interpreted as having had immunity to which-object misidentification in mind rather than immunity to \textit{de re} misidentification (cf. 286–288). I think Pryor is misled in this point by his claim (whide). Given that the two kinds of immunity are logically independent, it is quite clear that Shoemaker had immunity to \textit{de re} misidentification in mind. First, Shoemaker’s definition of immunity explicitly requires that “the speaker knows \textit{some particular thing} to be $\varphi$” and not just that the speaker knows something or other to be $\varphi$ (1968: 557; my emphasis). But more importantly, Shoemaker has in fact considered a case of which-object misidentification long before Pryor introduced these cases to the debate. However, Shoemaker’s stance was to \textit{not} count such cases as in error through misidentification (cf. 1970: 270, fn. 4).

Moving on to the substantial points, consider how (whide) figures in Pryor’s discussion of immunity to error through misidentification. Pryor’s main strategy is to focus on immunity to which-object misidentification, because this, he claims, is the more basic and hence more interesting epistemic status (cf. 272, 286, 287). Pryor’s idea that which-immunity is more fundamental is based precisely on the claim that which-immunity implies \textit{de re} immunity: “immunity to which-misidentification entails, but is not entailed by, immunity to \textit{de re} misidentification. In that sense, immunity to which-misidentification is a more basic and more rare epistemic status” (286). Pryor’s strategy to focus on which-immunity plays an important role for instance in his discussion of quasi-memory. Pryor defends (against Evans) Shoemaker’s view that quasi-memory undermines the immunity of memory-based self-ascriptions. In one of his objections, Pryor claims that even if Evans has shown that memory-based judgments are immune to \textit{de re} misidentification, they are not immune to which-object misidentification (cf. 293). The strength of this objection depends crucially on the question whether which-immunity really is the more interesting phenomenon.

Moreover, Pryor’s claim that memory judgments are vulnerable to which-object misidentification presupposes that memory-judgments involve identity-neutral grounds. As Coliva points out: “which-misidentification \{applies\} to memory-based judgments only if their grounds are identity-neutral” (2006: 411; Coliva’s emphasis). But many authors find that memory necessarily presents remembered experiences as one’s own.\footnote{Pryor addresses this worry by claiming that it is possible to partially undercut memory judgments in a way that leaves intact grounds for an existential claim (cf. 296 f.). However, it has been objected that the kind of defeater suggested by Pryor, namely telling the subject “that some of his memories are quasi-memories of events in someone else’s past life” (295), brings in new grounds for an existential claim rather than leaving intact the original grounds (cf. Smith 2006, see also Coliva 2006: 409).} More generally, many authors find that introspection in general and also proprioception necessarily present one’s states as one’s own. A claim that figures centrally in the debate on immunity is precisely the idea that introspection and proprioception do not leave open or even allow for the question whose states
one is being aware of (see e.g. Shoemaker 1968; Evans 1982; Coliva 2002; Wright 2012). Given that the immunity thesis is a thesis about judgments based on introspection (or, more generally, based on first-personal awareness, including bodily awareness), and hence about judgments that do not involve identity-neutral grounds, it may be worried that Pryor’s notion of which-object misidentification simply does not apply to the interesting cases.

Of course, things aren’t quite that simple. Although normally introspection doesn’t leave open any question of identification, two kinds of unusual cases have come to dominate the debate. First, we have cross-wiring cases, that is cases in which one subject’s perceptual, proprioceptive, or mnemonic experiences derive in a causally deviant way from another subject (see e.g. Shoemaker 1970, Evans 1982: 184–189, Smith 2006: 278, Chen 2009: 29ff., and Langland-Hassan (2014)). Second, we have pathological cases such as thought insertion, in which a subject is introspectively aware of a mental state but claims of that state that it is not his own (see e.g. Campbell 1999, Gallagher 2000, Coliva 2002, Lane & Liang 2011, de Vignemont 2012). There is a lot of controversy surrounding the question whether subjects in cross-wiring cases or in pathological cases have grounds for a de re ascription, an existential claim, or any grounds at all. No matter how this issue is resolved, my main point will stand: given that de re misidentification and which-object misidentification are mutually exclusive, which-immunity does not imply de re immunity and the discussion of immunity to error through misidentification cannot be reduced to the discussion of which-immunity.

References


