
PHAVISMINDA Journal
Volume 14 (May 2015): 49-58.

I IS A LONELY WORD

Amosa L. Velez

Abstract. This paper holds that “I,” the word that describes aloneness does not necessarily imply loneliness. “I” strongly suggests self-attachment, a recognition of an individual’s priority over the other. Tracing the notion of “I” from both western and eastern philosophical tradition, more importantly, from the Indian and Chinese tradition, the paper argues that the “I” (*atman* or *ren*) is not the lonely “I” existing in aloneness in and for himself. At best, the “I” is in solitude but has genuine concern for others as well.

Keywords: loneliness, solitude, *atman*, *brahman*, *ren*

Introduction

A naughty glance at the title of this article can make some English-speakers blush at the seemingly blatant violation of one rule in English grammar. Why? Because the “I” should be followed by “am” as “first person.” Right? But no, there is no grammatical error in the title since we are not appropriating “I” as “first person.” Rather we are taking “I” as a mere word.

It is common sense that “I” is indeed a lonely word for it is only one letter; *nagsolo sya sa Sugbuanon pa*. Then why bother about so common place as common sense posits? It is because the I-ness of “I” and its loneliness are not as commonplace nor common sense as you and I very well know. Moreover, you and I are also aware that being alone and being lonely are not synonymous.

One who is alone is not necessarily lonely while one can be lonely in a crowd. For instance, an unmarried human being (whose life is spent alone in singleness) is not necessarily a lonely person whereas a married person who lives with his/her better (or bitter?) half can be most lonely and forlorn when “love is lost.” Something similar can be said of “I.” A one-letter word as this is not necessarily a lonely word. This we shall deal shortly after a digression into an important distinction between loneliness and solitude.

Loneliness and Solitude Differentiated

There are times in a human being's life when s/he prefers being alone, a time to reflect, to contemplate—to find the deepest answers to his queries, or to capture that beauty he wants to materialize on a canvass, or to figure out the melody of a song never before heard, or to discover the farthest limits of the universe, or simply to be silent in the presence of his God and hopefully experience an “encounter with silence” (to borrow Karl Rahner's expression). These are times when man's aloneness is not loneliness. Paul Tillich calls this aloneness solitude. For him, “solitude... [expresses] the glory of being alone.” Today some people plead: “Please give me space”—which can mean “Please leave me alone, to be by myself at least for a while” and sometimes even for a long while.

There are times also when aloneness is unwanted and hence, unwelcome. Instances of these are when aloneness is experienced by: a child who feels discrimination at home, an adolescent's being rejected by his *barkada*, an adult feeling misunderstood by his workmates, the Boss's reading avoidance in the behavior of subordinates, the elderly's need to be needed met with indifference, the sick's alienation amidst healthy people, the hungry's feeling forsaken as the affluent pass him by; the innocent “convict,” the guilty conscience—they all feel lonely. Some lines of a song aptly describe this condition; “lonely in a crowd, friends I cannot find, people all around but where are you?” The reasons for the loneliness diverge but they are all signals of a desperate call—for the other's care, or at bottom, love. Tillich sees this feeling as the negative side of aloneness, in his insight into loneliness, “the pain of being alone.” But this is not the loneliness hinted at in the title of this essay. It is rather the loneliness at the opposite end of the “spectrum”—of the ones who are deaf and blind to this call.

The Suppositions of “I”

Flashing back to the first paragraph of this article, the first sight of “I” does call to mind our first English grammar lesson. “I” is the “first person” singular. And describing “I” in the title as such follows naturally from its being a one-letter word. Notice by the way, that in logic, “I” has two suppositions; material and formal; materially, it is a

one-letter word while formally, it means “first person.” It is in both suppositions that “I” can be a lonely word. It is in fact a lonely word when “I” is formally lonely although the material aloneness of “I” does not of necessity imply formal loneliness.

Nonetheless is “I” really lonely? Formally, yes, when a human being is so fascinated with himself and so full of one’s self that the other is simply irrelevant. Then, indeed, “I” is a lonely word. One line of a song summarizes his lifestyle; “... my echo, my shadow and me,” or, it is like declaiming “I go to a party. The whole cake is *mine* and the ice cream belongs to *me*,” yet feels a nagging dissatisfaction and emptiness.

No, if and when the I-ness in declaring—“I am me, I am the designer of my life, I am its architect, I am in-charge of my life (to borrow Andrew Greely’s thought), ‘I am the captain of my fate: I am the master of my soul,’”—it is construed as an acknowledgment of every human being’s singularity and an acceptance for responsibility for his life. To borrow Tillich’s words, this is the “glory of being alone.” It is the solitude he needs to build himself.

And no, if I can accommodate the other in my life. But this is easier said than done. Self-attachment is as natural as breathing. One’s self is that which is nearest to a human person and self-preservation naturally follows this “nearest” to the extent of being instinctive. It is thus understandably matter-of-fact that self is prior to the other such that even a philanthropist (if he is not of the “blue-blooded type”) can shrink from his generosity when it poses a threat to his safety and security.

“I” from the Philosophical Perspective

The Western Viewpoint

There is a philosophical angle to the issue of I or self or ego. The Western discipline, Philosophical Anthropology, confronts, beyond everything else about the human reality, the question “Who am I?” Some Occidental philosophers, however, do not address this query. To mention only two of them for the purpose of this article, while Socrates exhorts “Know thyself” because “an unreflected life is not worth living,” Kant’s inquiries focus on three fundamental “musts”:

“What can I know, what ought I to do, and what may I hope?;” questions for me to answer so I can be an authentic person.³

The Eastern Viewpoint

Among oriental philosophers, the I or self does not escape notice. Some of them express a very low regard for the self while others have such a lofty esteem for the I to the point of defying him (it). There are other who portray the selfish I while a significant number present the selfless self.

From the Indian Standpoint. Let us attend without assenting to the diminution of the self as well as its negation and magnification.

Charvaka, an Indian philosophical school, contends that man is only body whose soul, if there is one, is thus also material.⁴ This philosophy rejects the first two of four classical Indian values; *dharma* / duty, *mosha* / release, *artha* / wealth and *kama* / pleasure.⁵ Since in this thinking man need only “eat, drink and be merry, for once the body is reduced to ashes there is no hope of coming back here again,” the Charvakas disregard *dharma* and *moksha* from *samsara* / reincarnation for nothing or no one is reborn.⁶ Where is “I” in this philosophy? It must be the through-and-through-material human being for it is he who, with his wealth, enjoys life’s pleasure.⁷ This materialist philosophy, however, was unpopular, with all the other schools of Indian philosophy “castigating” it severely. Yet the diametrically opposite criticism emerges from this devastation of materialism. All these other Indian philosophies, being so overly spiritual, are misunderstood as only mysticism notwithstanding the fact that mystical knowledge is a philosophical institution into reality from inside-out.⁸

The concern of Vedanta (of Indian pre-systematic philosophy) is that true self. The Upanishad, called Vedanta for its being literally the end-part of the Veda, seeks to find who the self truly is.⁹ In this Vedic philosophy, the I (self, *atman*) is nullified and magnified. The I or the self-we-think-we-are, whose “existence” is caused by our ignorance (*avidya*) is, after all, not real. And so it can be conjectured that his loneliness or solitude is illusory. This negation of I (the I-we-think-we-are), however, is the springboard to its magnification once that I

realizes his true Self, that he is in fact *Atman* (the Self-proved, the Ultimate Subject, the *Saksi*). To facilitate the understanding that *Atman* is indeed *Atman*, the Chandogya Upanishad tells of a story wherein after the salt's dissolving in a glass of water making it saline, the father discloses to his son that that subtle essence (the now-invisible-salt and so the "nothing" that permeates the now-saline water) "*Tat Tvam Asi Shvetaketu*" (that Thou Art Shvetaketu). In this context, "I" is beyond loneliness and solitude for *Atman* or *Brahman* being the Ultimate Reality is both immanent and transcendent and thus "neither this nor this" / "*neti, neti*".¹⁰ Or perhaps one can venture to say that the aloneness of cosmic *Brahman* / *Ishvara* is its solitude.¹¹

Here is one more philosopher from the shores of India. When prince Siddhartha Gautama (Sakhyamuni) became the *Buddha*, his teachings were interpreted differently by his followers such that they were understood as exhorting egocentricity on the one hand and alterity on the other. His inspirational words are significant: "Be a light unto thyself." "And now, brethren, I take my leave of you: all the constituents of being are transitory; work out your salvation with diligence." And again: "Let all the sin and miseries of the world fall upon my shoulders, so that all the beings may be liberated from them."¹²

From the Chinese Standpoint. Chinese philosophy is replete with insights into the "I" (self). Self-centeredness is the core of Yang Chu's philosophy.¹³ It asserts that "it behooves no one to lose a hair even to save a kingdom..."—a cogent conclusion from his philosophy that "man despise[s] things and take[s] care of his life" for the reason that whereas a lost kingdom is restorable, a lost life is irretrievable. Here, Yang Chu's conferring the "I" supreme importance sans idolizing him is beyond reasonable doubt.

Kong Zi recognizes the unrivaled and irreduplicable importance of the I (self) but not for the same reason as Yang Chu's since its invariable concomitance is the supreme obligation to develop the self (I) for the sake of the other (the not-I). So, the I must develop his potentials to the fullest for on him depends society's well-being. The *Great Learning* (one of the Four Books) is in fact a Chinese Reader, the fundamental Handbook of Learning for every Chinese child to master (during state

philosophy). This book is quoted below for the total appreciation of the importance Kong Zi gives to the “I.”

*The Great Learning*¹⁴

The way of learning to be great consists in manifesting the clear character, loving the people, and abiding in the highest good. Only after knowing what to abide in can one become. Only after having been calm can one be tranquil. Only after having achieved tranquility can one have peaceful repose. Only after having peaceful repose can one begin to deliberate. Only after deliberation can the end be attained. Things have their roots and branches. Affairs have their beginnings and their ends. To know what is first and what is last will lead one near the Way. The ancients who wished to manifest their clean character to the world would first bring order to their states. Those who wish to bring order to their states would first regulate their families. Those who wish to regulate their families would first cultivate their personal lives. Those who wished to cultivate their personal lives would first rectify their minds. Those who wished to rectify their minds would first make their wills sincere. Those who wished to make their wills sincere would first extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things. When things are investigated, knowledge is extended; when knowledge is extended, the will becomes sincere; when the will is sincere, the mind is rectified; when the mind is rectified the personal life is cultivated; when the personal life is cultivated, the family will be regulated; when the family will be regulated the state will be in order; and when the state is in order there will be peace throughout the world. From the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard cultivation of the personal life as the root or foundation. There is never a case when the root is in disorder or when the branches are in order. There has never been a case when what is treated with

great importance becomes a matter of slight importance or what is treated with slight importance becomes a matter of great importance.”

Simply said and as affirmed by Kong Zi, “self-cultivation is the basis of the world-order,” thus positing the importance of the “I,” a lavish importance that swerves from selfish self-centeredness since it veers towards the other.¹⁵ It is remarkable that the mandarin word for man is ren (仁), a character that combines man (亻) and two (二) signifying man and another man.¹⁶ *Ren* is severally translated as human-heartedness, love, kindness. Kong Zi’s moral philosophy permeates his teachings concerning the right way to live in society. One pungent exhortation can be read in his *Analects*: When you encounter a superior man’s strength, try to equal him; when you see the weaknesses of an inferior man, look within you (*Lun Yü*, one of the Four Books).

The “I” in Loneliness and Solitude

In the light of the above-exposition of the philosophical perspective of “I,” the issue regarding “I as a lonely word” can now be addressed even though without finality.

While the experience Vedic “I” (self, *atman*) of loneliness and solitude is deceptive since “I” is not real (*maya*) the same experience is unthinkable of “I” (Self, *Atman*) inasmuch as being the Ultimate Reality, It is beyond it. However, as said earlier, the solitariness of the Ultimate “I” can be construed as solitude (the glory of being alone).

Although “no-ego” is a corollary of the Buddha’s philosophy of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*), what is illusory (*maya*) must be the seeming existence of the ego broken into its arrogance, selfishness, avarice, egocentricity, etc. But the self (ego) in its integrity does exist, is real; and the Buddha’s exhortation for his disciples to live by can mean that in the life of Buddhist monks loneliness and solitude are no strangers.

The Chinese “I” is no exception regarding the experience of loneliness and solitude, depending on whether one’s life is lived for oneself only or for the other also.

Granting without assenting that there are people who really want to keep to themselves, not because of traumatic experience but to be

able to do their “task” undisturbed; and who are convinced that “one who walks alone walks fast,” here, the “I” is not necessarily a lonely word. But one who experiences a need for others but deliberately avoids them or recognizes others’ and need for him/her yet “play” deaf and blind, then, “I” is indeed a lonely word.

Before concluding this article, it is worthwhile to reflect on the last stanza of the following song:

In the evening of my life I shall look to the sunset ...
And the question I’ll be asked only I can answer
Was brave and strong and true?
Did I fill the world with love my whole life through
Did I fill the world with love
Did I fill the world with love
Did I fill the world with love
My whole life through?

In conclusion, if and when a human person is grossly without concern for the other, then, the “I” is truly lonely both formally and materially.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Co, Alfredo. *Philosophy of Ancient China*. Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 2009.
- Fung Yu-Lan. *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. New York: MacMillan, 1960.
- Lin Yu-tang, *The Wisdom of Confucius*. China: Cheng Chung Book, 2009
- Sharma, Chandradhar. *Indian Philosophy: A Critical Survey* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1962.
- Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, et al. *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1952.

Wing-tsit Chan, trans. and comp. *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963.

ENDNOTES

¹ Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*; [book online]; available from <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1630&C=1597>; 29 April 2015.

² William Henley, "Invictus."

³ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A805=B833.

⁴ Chandradhar Sharma, *Indian Philosophy: A Critical Survey* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1962), 30-32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, et al, *History of Philosophy Eastern and Western* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), 21.

⁹ Sharma, *Indian Philosophy*, 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13 and 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 63-64.

¹³ Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, 1960).

¹⁴ Wing-tsit Chan, trans. And comp., *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, 1963), 86-87.

¹⁵ Lin Yu-tang, *The Wisdom of Confucius* (China: Cheng Chung Book, 2009).

¹⁶ Alfredo Co, *Philosophy of Ancient China* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 2009), 112.