

First Person Thought and the Essential Indexicali. Today's expedition

We often think and express thoughts about ourselves using the first person, for instance when we think "I'm so great!" or "I'd like a snack!"

This kind of first-person thought raises a range of questions.

- What is it to think of oneself in the first person, to be *self-conscious*?
- What *psychological* difference does it make to think a thought in the first person?
- What is the *semantic content* of these terms which explains that psychological difference?
- Is the first person *eliminable*? Can we capture the contribution it makes in any other way, without using a first-person pronoun?
- Is it possible for anyone else to think exactly the same 'I' beliefs as you?
- What do the content of these beliefs need to be in order to explain *action* on the basis of them?

More generally, we should be asking ourselves as we go along:

- What are the implications for our theory of belief?
- What are our implications for our theories of the self?
- What is the relationship between the two?

ii. Assembling our equipmenta. **Propositions**

Propositions are generally taken to be (i) the meaning of sentences, (ii) the primary bearers of truth value and (iii) the object of propositional attitudes such as belief.

b. **Indexicals**

- The first person, 'I', is an *indexical*
- Indexicals are terms whose content changes depending on the context of use.
- E.g. here, now, there, then, that, this (the latter four are *demonstratives*. Unlike *pure indexicals* they require some additional contextual information or act of demonstration to fix their content.)

Kaplan's theory of indexicals in <50 words:

- Sentences containing indexicals, like "I'd like a snack", can express different propositions when uttered by different people (those propositions may differ in truth value.)
- Different utterances of it express the same *character* though they differ in content.
- Character is a function from context to content.

iii. The Big Claim in the Vicinity We Need to Grapple With

John Perry: the use of certain indexicals is *ineliminable*. They are used to express thoughts that cannot be expressed any other way.

(NB Hector-Neri Castañeda had already suggested this, but Perry's expression of the idea has become, for whatever dubious reason, the canonical expression...)

Why think that this is the case?

Perry's argument is grounded in a series of examples:

Shopper: "I once followed a trail of sugar on a supermarket floor, pushing my cart down the aisle on one side of a tall counter and back the aisle on the other, seeking the shopper with the torn sack to tell him he was making a

mess. With each trip around the counter, the train became thicker. But I seemed unable to catch up. Finally it dawned on me. I was the shopper I was trying to catch.”

- How would you characterize the belief Perry has before his realization?
- How would you characterize the belief Perry has after his realization?
- What is the difference between these beliefs?
- Is there a way of expressing that second belief that doesn't employ a first-person pronoun?

#### The puzzle:

“When we replace [the word “I” in my expression of what I came to believe] with other designations of me, we no longer have an explanation of my behavior and so, it seems, no longer an attribution of the same belief. It seems to be an *essential* indexical. But without such a replacement, all we have to identify the belief is the sentence “I am making a mess”. But that sentence by itself doesn't seem to identify the crucial belief, for if someone else had said it, they would have expressed a different belief, a false one.”

- Can you come up with a redescription of the belief that avoids the use of the indexical *and* that preserves its ability to explain the relevant behavior?

#### Breaking down the puzzle:

- ‘I’ is irreplaceable if we are to explain action on the basis of these beliefs
- But equally the sentence expressed with “I” doesn't succeed in identifying the relevant belief which explains behavior because if someone else had said it they would have expressed a different, false belief.

So what *is* the content of these beliefs?

More generally: what does this tell us about the nature of belief?

- Perry thinks that this poses a problem for the view that belief is a relation between subjects and propositions, where propositions are conceived of as bearers of truth and falsity...
- He thinks this shows that our behaviour hinges on *character* not just content.

The bigger question here: can one's belief states be classified by the proposition that is believed?

Do Fregean modes of presentation help us out here? I.e. is the difference here one of a mode of presentation?

- Not really because Fregean senses can still be captured by descriptions. And one can think of someone under any description without realizing that that is met by *you*.
- Frege's conclusion is that ‘Every one is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else’ (*Thought*).

#### iv. Possible ramifications #1: Lewis on de dicto versus de se knowledge

David Lewis thinks that examples of this kind show that thought involves a relationship to **properties not propositions**.

- Sometimes properties will do the job when propositions won't...
- And whenever propositions do the job, properties can do just as well because...
  - A proposition is the set of possible worlds where that proposition holds
  - **To any proposition there corresponds the property** of inhabiting a world where that proposition holds.
    - E.g. the proposition that David Lewis is right corresponds to the property of being in a world in which David Lewis is right.

Ok, but why think properties are an improvement? Consider the following examples...

“An amnesiac, Rudolf Lingens, is lost in the Stanford library. He reads a number of things in the library, including a biography of himself, and a detailed account of the library in which he is lost. ... He still won't know who he is, and where he is, no matter how much knowledge he piles up, until that moment when he is ready to say, “*This place is aisle five, floor six, of Main Library, Stanford. I am Rudolf Lingens.*”” (Perry 1977 479)

“Book learning will help Lingens locate himself in logical space. The more he reads; the more he finds out about the world he lives in, so the fewer worlds are left where he may perhaps be living. ... But none of this, by itself, can guarantee that he knows where in the world he is. He needs to locate himself not only in logical space but also in ordinary space. ... He needs to identify himself as a member of a subpopulation whose boundaries don't follow the borders of the worlds – a subpopulation whose sole member at Lingens's own world is Lingens himself.” (Lewis)

“Consider the case of the two gods. They inhabit a certain possible world, and they know exactly which world it is. Therefore they know every proposition that is true at their world. Insofar as knowledge is a propositional attitude, they are omniscient. Still I can imagine them to suffer ignorance: neither one knows which of the two he is. They are not exactly alike. One lives on top of the tallest mountain and throws down manna; the other lives on the top of the coldest mountain and throws down thunderbolts. Neither one knows whether he lives on the tallest mountain or on the coldest mountain; nor whether he throws down manna or thunderbolts. ...

But if it is possible to lack knowledge and not lack any propositional knowledge, then the lacked knowledge must not be propositional. If the gods came to know which was which, they would know more than they do. But they wouldn't know more propositions. There are no more to know. Rather, they would self-ascribe more of the properties they possess.”

- These examples suggest that there's a fundamental difference between our knowledge of the world and our knowledge of *our place* in the world. No amount of the former amounts to the latter. So what *is* the latter?
- Lewis's account lets us say that what the Gods learn when they can self-locate is that they can *self-ascribe the property of being that particular God*. And what Lingens knows is that he can self-ascribe the property of being located *there*.
- On Lewis's account, regular *de dicto* thought is thus a species of *de se* thought in which one just self ascribes the property of being in a particular set of possible worlds.
- That means that for Lewis, *all* belief involves the self-ascription of a proposition, and so involves some degree of self-consciousness.
  - o You're never just thinking “David Lewis is right” you're thinking, in effect “I'm in a possible world in which David Lewis is right.”

➤ Self-ascription is taken to be a basic relation... So how much of an improvement really is this?

#### v. Possible Ramifications #2: Millikan on thought and language

- These cases have often been taken to show that there is something special about *indexicals* and thoughts expressed using them.
- Mental states are always relative to a subjective view point (remember all that stuff in intentionality about how they are *perspectival*?)
  - o Dennett “Indexicality of sentences appears to be the linguistic counterpart of that relativity to a subjective point of view that is a hallmark of mental states” 1987 p.132
- Ruth Millikan denies that it is any such counterpart.

“Now it is trivial that if I am to react in a special and different way to the knowledge that I, RM, am positioned *so* in the world, a way quite unlike how I would react knowing anyone else was positioned *so* in the world, then my inner term for RM must bear a very special and unique relation to my disposition to act. *But what does that have to do with indexicality?* My inner name “RM” obviously is not like other names in my mental vocabulary. It is a name that hooks

up with my knowhows, with my abilities and dispositions to act, in a rather special way..... Let us call it.... RM's "active self-name". It names a person whom I know, under that name, *how* to manipulate directly; I *know how* to effect her behavior. But in order to know how to manipulate this person, why would I need to think indexical thoughts? What has knowhow to do with indexicality?" p.730

Millikan makes the following argument:

- Key feature of indexicality is that the meaning of terms shifts depending on their context of use, and that their referent is identified on the basis of that changing context.
- But there's no mental analogue to that potential change in content, nor the need to reidentify the referent of the term.

Millikan draws out the following upshots from this:

- The semantics of a public language expression does not necessarily reflect in a direct way the semantics of the thought it customarily expresses.
- The semantics of thought is not sufficient to determine the psychology of a rational person. "What is the same thought semantically may be a very different thought psychologically."

vi. Possible ramifications #3: this is really about *action*, not thought *per se*.

Note that all of the puzzles in the vicinity arise in relation to our explanation of *action*. This comes out in Gareth Evans discussion of these kinds of cases in "Self-Identification"...

"Oedipus was thinking about Oedipus, that is to say, himself, when he thought that the slayer of Laius should be killed; but Oedipus was not thinking about himself 'self-consciously' (this is just a label for the kind of thinking which interests us), because he did not realize that *he* was the slayer of Laius." ("Self Identification" p.185)

What is it for Oedipus to realize that *he* is the slayer of Laius?

- He must appreciate the relevance of the various special ways he has of gaining knowledge about himself to propositions about the slayer of Laius
- He must realise how to act upon propositions of the form "The slayer of Laius is F."

i.e. it consists in the sensitivity of thoughts to certain information, and the way in which thoughts are manifested in action

Self-conscious thoughts also rest upon various ways we have of gaining knowledge of ourselves as physical things. "If there is to be a division between the mental and the physical, it is a division which is spanned by the Ideas we have of ourselves."

In fact, Evans observes that self-conscious thought doesn't require any standard *knowledge* at all...

"Just as it is not necessary, if a subject is to be thinking about a place as 'here', that he actually have any information deriving from it, so it seems not to be necessary, if a subject is to think about himself self-consciously, that he actually have any information about himself. A subject may be amnesiac and anaesthetized, and his senses may be prevented from functioning; yet he may still be able to think about himself, wondering, for example, why he is *not* receiving information in the usual ways."

Relatedly, Cappelen and Dever (2013) think that these examples just show that **action contexts are opaque** and don't allow for substitution *salva veritate* (e.g. if you're trying to catch the criminal and you don't realize that the criminal is also identical with your friend, you won't move to capture your friend) but that doesn't mean there's something fundamentally different about the underlying nature of the thought.

### Recommended Reading

- \*Perry, John, 'The Problem of the Essential Indexical', *Noûs*, 13, no. 1 (1979): 3-21.

- \*Lewis, David, , 'Attitudes *De Dicto* and *De Se*', *Philosophical Review*, 88, no. 4 (1979): 513-43.
- Frege, Gottlob, 'Thoughts', in his *Collected Papers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 351-72.
- Evans, Gareth, 'Self-Identification', in Q. Cassam, ed., *Self-Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 184-209 'Essay 6'. This is a reprint of chapter 6 of his *The Varieties*