



## DEMYSTIFYING THE MYTH. PERRY: REVISITING THE ESSENTIAL INDEXICAL

We often feel inclined to express certain attitudes using sentences containing indexicals. These are, paradigmatically, cases of beliefs about oneself, which we normally express with sentences containing the firstperson pronoun “I,” or about the present time, which we normally express with sentences containing the temporal adverb “now.” One could, of course, express a belief about oneself using a sentence containing a proper name, or about the present moment with a sentence containing a date. But there are, it seems, clear and important features that make “indexically expressible beliefs” different from other sorts of beliefs. Or so did Perry, among others, claimed in his 1977 and 1979 papers (and has kept claiming ever since).

Perry was not the first, and not the only one, to realize that there is something philosophically relevant about indexicals and indexically expressible beliefs. Before him, Castañeda (1966, 1967, 1968) and Prior (1959, 1968) made observations in a similar direction; and, roughly at the same time, Chilshom (1981) and, most famously, Lewis (1979).

Since then, many authors have commented on the role of indexicals and of indexically expressible beliefs. Some have defended Perry’s proposal, or parts of it, at least. I call them, somehow dramatically, the “apologists.” Many others, however, have either disregarded the whole issue or have not accepted Perry’s explanation. Those who realize the importance of the essential indexical, but disagree with Perry’s account, I call “skeptics.” Those who disregard the discussion altogether and consider, for instance, the essential indexical a “myth,” I call “negationists.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The boundaries between apologists and skeptics are pretty vague. Most authors accept some of Perry’s explanation, but not all of it. Similarly, even if it might be that Lewis’s account is the most widely used nowadays, few, if anyone, accept Lewis’s full explanation, which includes modal realism. Many conflate

In his book *Revisiting the Essential Indexical* (2019) Perry mostly deals with negationists and, in particular, with Cappelen and Dever, who defend that:

...there is no such thing as essential indexicality, irreducibly *de se* attitudes, or self-locating attitudes. Our goal is not to show that we think these phenomena – that they should be explained in ways different from how, e.g. Lewis and Perry explained them. Our goal is to show that the entire topic is an illusion – there is nothing there (Cappelen and Dever, 2013: 3)

Perry offers a clear, comprehensive and devastating answer to Cappelen and Dever's claims in *The Inessential Indexical* (2013). In this paper my goal is to emphasize the importance of this book and to insist on clarifying some central issues that have been largely ignored by many participants in the debate. In the first part of this paper I shortly comment on Perry's response to Cappelen and Dever, showing how they also apply to other negationists. In the second part, I discuss Arthur Prior's example, and Perry's take on Lewis.

### Some comments on *Revisiting the Essential Indexical*

Anyone with even a slight interest in the philosophy of language has surely heard of a messy shopper (Perry himself) spilling sugar on a supermarket. Most would also be familiar with Heimson, who believed he was Hume; with the tardy professor, late for a meeting; with the lost hiker, at Gilmore Lake; and with amnesiac Lingens, lost in the Stanford library. These examples, presented in Perry's 1977 and 1979 papers have proven to be very catchy. During the last decades, Perry has enriched and elaborated his views substantially, but the examples used in his earlier papers have become part of the philosophical *cannon*, so to speak. They have been quoted, used, retold and reinterpreted countless times. Often, however, the lessons that have been extracted from them, and the explanations given of them, have little in common with Perry's (both in those early papers or in later elaborations).

I take Cappelen and Dever's view, as expressed in their 2013 book, to be an extreme case of misinterpretation of Perry's examples and of Perry's proposal. Cappelen and Dever reject the significance of the examples themselves, and of what they display. They call themselves "skeptics," I call them "negationists."

Negationists distort not only the explanation of the issues, but the issues themselves. Cappelen and Dever do so, mostly, to argue against what they call

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part of Perry's explanation with parts of Lewis's; a practice that I find particularly confusing.

“perspectivism:” the claim that there are certain beliefs that include the agent and their situation in time in their contents. All beliefs, they claim, are about the “objective” world, that is, about the world itself.

They argue that admitting that indexicals generate or illustrate some particular puzzles to the explanation of belief content, causal role and cognitive significance, is adamant to a renunciation of objectivity. But of course, none of the examples mentioned above, and certainly not Perry’s explanation of them, entail (nor presuppose) that indexically expressible beliefs are not about the world *in itself*. To use Falk’s expression, Cappelen and Dever are “whipping a straw man.” (2015, 427). In my opinion, this description captures pretty well Cappelen and Dever’s whole enterprise in their book. And I think Perry shows why and how this is so.

Perry answers to Cappelen and Dever’s harsh criticism in a clear, direct, structured and very convincing manner. His arguments are withering. It is difficult to imagine how Cappelen and Dever could reasonably respond to this (they haven’t tried, as far as I know). Perry doesn’t answer to all the claims and criticisms of Cappelen and Dever. That would have been not only pointless but also rather boring (to read and, I suspect, to write). Rather, he focuses on two or three main confusions and answers them.

Cappelen and Dever present, discuss, and reject six kinds of “alleged explanatory roles” of indexicals. Perry focuses most of his discussion on the first two. They are directly attributed to him. They are also the fundamental ones, I think, for a discussion on the role of indexicals in thought and action.

**Agency:** [...] the idea that indexicality (and “the *de se*” in particular) plays an essential role in explaining and rationalizing action.

**Opacity:** [...] the question of whether the presence of indexicals in (apparently) opaque contexts raises questions that are fundamentally and interestingly different from general issues about opacity. (2013, 14–15. Boldface in the original)

Cappelen and Dever assume that Perry defends **Agency**, and they argue that indexicals do not raise questions different in any significant way from general issues about opacity. As Perry clearly explains, however, he never claimed that “*indexicality* plays an essential role in explaining and rationalizing action, but that in particular cases *indexicals* did” (Perry, 2019, 18). Cappelen and Dever take indexicals (or indexicality) as the *explanans*. Perry only claimed that they were part of the *explanandum*:

[W]hat did the explaining was the distinction between the how and the what, between belief states and what is believed... Using indexicals exhibits a pattern —the distinction between *how* one does something and *what* one does in that way— that certainly plays an essential role in explaining and rationalizing action, recognized by (almost) any theory of action. (Perry, 2019, 18)

It is clear from Perry's earlier texts that he took indexicals to be part of the sentences that give you the phenomena to be explained. The difference between "John Perry is making a mess" and "I am making a mess" is the phenomenon to be explained. Indexicals are part of the phenomenon, part of the puzzle, not its explanation. I will come back to this distinction in the next section, when discussing ways of classifying beliefs.

Cappelen and Dever's **Opacity** is, as Perry says "more mystifying," but it is not entirely original. The claim is also made —with some differences— by two other notable "negationists": Millikan (1990) and Magidor (2015).<sup>2</sup> To this, Perry answers:

**The Confusion:** Cappelen and Dever confuse opacity with cognitive significance. This is the leitmotif of their book and the basis of most of their criticisms. But, as they might put it, there is nothing there. (2019, 19)

Perry discusses at length this confusion. In an attempt to make sense of it, he tries a very "charitable" reading of their claims, substituting "opacity" for "cognitive significance." This is, indeed, a very charitable reading. **Opacity** is, perhaps, the central claim of Cappelen and Dever's book. They present "Fregean counterparts" for most of Perry's, Lewis's and Prior's examples. Still, even changing "opacity" for "cognitive significance" their main claim does not hold. There is something particular about indexicals, something that distinguishes them from proper names and other referring terms.

I will not give many details about Cappelen and Dever's arguments, or about Perry's answer to them. That would take too long and, besides, Perry's discussion is concise enough and very clear. For those who haven't read the book yet, however, I write below Cappelen and Dever's tenets on opacity — their "boldface claims"— and Perry's reconstruction in terms of cognitive significance. This short presentation will be enough, I think, to illustrate the confusion mentioned above, and why it remains so under a charitable interpretation. Here is what Cappelen and Dever say:

Here is one way to summarize Perry's claim:

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<sup>2</sup> They are not the only "negationists," although they are, perhaps, the most radical and notable. Other authors have expressed doubts about the philosophical relevance of the essential indexicals. Take for instance Devitt, who claims: "the received view is that there is something particularly problematic about first person thoughts, commonly known as 'de se'... I think that the received view is a myth" (2013, 133). It is not clear, however, if Devitt's rejection is of the essential indexical, or of a particular explanation of it (mostly based on Lewis's account of what an object of belief is). Other alleged negationists are Douven (2013) and Boer and Lycan (1980). See Ninan (2016) for a discussion of some of these views, which he labels "radical skeptics."

**Indexical Opacity.** There's a set of indexicals, *I-SET*, that cannot be substituted *salva veritate* in action-explanation contexts by any other expressions.

It should be clear that this is an instantiation of the more general thesis:

**Generic Opacity.** Co-referring expressions cannot be substituted *salva veritate* in action-explanation contexts. (2013, 33)

They proceed by offering a “Fregean counterpart” of the messy shopper example, substituting “Clark Kent” and “Superman” for “John Perry” and “I.” They conclude that “seeing Indexical Opacity as an instance of Generic Opacity suggests that there's nothing deeply central about indexicals here” (2013, 33).

Perry finds this way of summarizing his claim “quite puzzling.” I share his sense of puzzlement. None of the examples Perry gives involve or suggest that substitution of indexicals changes the truth-value of sentences. Also, on Perry's view, like in Kaplan's, attitude reports are *not* opaque.

Substituting “John Perry” for “I” in “I am making a mess” can be done *salva veritate*. It might be that the proposition expressed changes—depending on your view on propositions—, but certainly not the truth-value. What seems to change, in “action-explanation contexts,” is the cognitive significance. So, this is Perry's reformulation:

**Indexicals and Cognitive Significance.** Substituting indexicals with co-referential expressions may change the cognitive significance of the sentences in which they occur, including their explanatory force.

**Referring Expressions and Cognitive Significance.** Substituting any referring expression with co-referential expressions may change the cognitive significance of the sentences in which they occur, including their explanatory force. (2019, 33–4)

As I mentioned before, **Opacity** might be “mystifying” but it is not entirely original. Ruth Millikan defended something quite similar, in her paper “The myth of the essential indexical” (1990), and so did Magidor in “The myth of the De Se” (2015). There are some differences of detail among the three, of course, but they all think that the philosophical questions that indexicals raise for action and thought are illusions, “myths.” To sustain their views, and ignoring questions of detail, they argue that the issues Perry and Lewis discuss concerning indexicals are just instances of Fregean puzzles. These puzzles involved proper names, and not indexicals. So, there is nothing particularly problematic or “deep” or “philosophically relevant” about indexicals or, as they all say, about *de se* beliefs. More importantly, taken as instances of Fregean puzzles, negationists defend that a proper treatment of indexicals, and a proper explanation of Perry's and Lewis's examples do not require any modification to the traditional notion of propositional attitudes (the “doctrine

of propositions”). It is not my aim to refute, or even discuss negationists’s arguments. But I think it is worth mentioning several points.

First, most, if not all, focus on *de se* attitudes, which they wrongly attribute to Perry. Some, like Magidor, conclude that there is nothing philosophically interesting about Perry’s examples, and about indexically expressible beliefs. But she reaches this conclusion after discussing and rejecting Lewis’s account of Perry’s examples.<sup>3</sup>

She only discusses Perry proposal on a footnote (footnote 3, 275). And she does so to claim that

... the view he [Perry] opts for arguably has the resources for addressing the Frege’s puzzle more generally... but Perry should at least be considered to be a defender of the myth in so far as *he* construes the issue as a special challenge posed by *de se* beliefs. Moreover, Perry clearly supports Special Attitudes. Fn 3, 275. Her italics).

She concludes,

I maintain that the category of *de se* attitudes (if there is one) does not play any important role in the semantics of attitude reports or require any special amendment of our general account of propositional attitudes. The myth of the *de se* remains just that. (Magidor, 2015, 272)

But, as I explain in the next section, Perry does not defend that we need a special attitude to account for indexically expressible beliefs. What he proposes is that we talk of belief states and recognize two ways to classify them: according to what is believed and to the way in which one does it. Lewis, who coined and uses the expression “*de se*”, understands *de se* beliefs as the self-attribution of a property. So, he does seem to be claiming that we need a special attitude: self-attribution.<sup>4</sup> It appears that Magidor is attributing to Perry Lewis’s claims and definitions. Even if her arguments against *de se* were correct, they would not prove much about Perry’s explanation of indexically expressible beliefs and the challenges they pose. The *de se* might well be a myth, as she claims, and yet Perry’s puzzles and explanation remain real and philosophically relevant.

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<sup>3</sup> Talk of *de se* beliefs is very generalized, but it is not clear to me what it is meant by it. Some seem to take *de se* as just another way of saying “first-person.” See, for instance, García-Carpintero: “... first personal thoughts, which Lewis aptly called *de se*...” (2017, 253). But if this is so, what Magidor is saying is that first-person thoughts are a myth. This is quite implausible. But then, whenever something more is meant by *de se*, it is usually something like Lewis’s attitude of self-ascription of properties. And this is not part of the essential indexical, and it is not part of Perry’s account of it.

<sup>4</sup> This is, at least, the standard interpretation of Lewis’s theory. But see Perry (2019), chapter 12 for an alternative interpretation where self-ascription is not taken to be a special, new and primitive attitude.

Second, Fregean counterparts are only possible for what Perry calls “Type B” cases: where two people, or the same person in different spatiotemporal locations, do the same thing in different ways. Type B examples are the messy shopper, the lost hiker or the tardy professor. “Type A” cases are those where two people, or the same person in different spatiotemporal locations, do different things in the same way. An example of type A is Heimson and Hume.

Negationists only consider Type B cases. Cappelen and Dever claim that Type A ones are simply irrelevant.<sup>5</sup> Considering that Type A examples are meant to illustrate cases in which *what* is believed is different but the *how* is the same, it is no wonder that Cappelen and Dever think that Perry defends a very implausible and extreme form of perspectivism, according to which indexically expressible beliefs are “not objective.” Blurring the difference between the content of beliefs and ways of believing them is, in my opinion, what makes them think that the *how* is part of the *what*: that the ways of believing are part of what it is believed.

## Classifying beliefs

Castañeda talked about the indexicals “I” and “now” being “essential” because they cannot be defined in terms of other referring expressions. Perry uses the term “essential” in a similar way, to indicate that there is something, some information, that can only be expressed by an indexical. We use indexicals to refer to objects —oneself and the present time, respectively, in the case of “I” and “now”— and they convey certain information about these objects not conveyed by proper names, descriptions or dates.

When they are part of sentences that express what one believes, indexicals play an “essential” role in exactly that sense: in conveying certain information about the object of the belief. This information is essential to get at the content of our beliefs —what we believe— but also to understand the causal role beliefs have —for subsequent actions, mostly— and their cognitive significance —how it is that one might believe A and not believe B, even though A and B seem to have the same content and truth-value.

Roughly speaking, the basic idea is that there is a difference between beliefs that are about how the world is “in itself” and beliefs about the agent’s situation in the world. Perry calls the latter “locating beliefs” (1977) or

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<sup>5</sup> Not only Type A cases are irrelevant for them though. Section 4.2 of their book is called “Some Irrelevant Cases.” These cases are: one Type A, “Hume in his study” (the Heimson-Hume example), and one Type B, “The department meeting” (what I call here “the tardy professor”). I use these two examples in the next section. I think they are very useful to understand Perry’s view. Curiously enough, Cappelen and Dever do not consider Prior’s “Thank goodness” example (which I briefly discuss below) and Lewis’s “two gods” example “irrelevant,” but rather “confusing.” I must admit that I fail to understand the rationale behind this classification.

“selflocating beliefs” (1979): “one’s beliefs about where one is, when one is, and who one is. Such beliefs seem essentially indexical” (Perry, 1979: 29).<sup>6</sup>

How to classify beliefs is a matter of controversy. Following basic intuitions from folk psychology, it would seem that there is a difference in what one believes and how one believes it and, consequently, how one would normally express it. These are, if I am not wrong, the intuitions Perry uses and the distinction he exploits. To put it in different, and perhaps more accurate terms: it is one thing to believe the same thing and another quite different to be in the same belief state.

Consider Perry’s tardy professor (1979, 29) and his two beliefs, expressible as:

1. The department meeting begins at noon.
2. The department meeting begins now

Assuming that noon is the time of belief state—and, hence, the time referred to by “now” in (2)—in one sense, it seems that the professor would express one and the same thing with (1) and (2): that the meeting begins at 12:00 of the relevant day. What he believes seems to be the same on both cases. In another sense, however, (1) and (2) clearly seem to express different beliefs in at least three ways. First, the sentences used to express them are different: one includes an indexical and the other a noun. Second, the causal role of each belief seems to be quite different: (1) might make him write down “meeting” besides the number 12 in his calendar; (2), in contrast, should make him leave the office and go to the meeting (Perry’s professor is tardy, but responsible). Third, their cognitive significance is different: the professor might, and actually does at first, believe (1), but not (2).

One should be able to say that two people believe alike if they believe the same content or proposition, even if they are at different times or places, or even in different belief states. Similarly, one should be able to say that if two people believe, at noon, (1) or (2), they agree; even if they don’t realize it.<sup>7</sup> This accounts for the intuition that the tardy professor believed the *same thing*

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<sup>6</sup> Notice that this is substantially different from claiming that indexicals are essential to *have* a certain belief, in the sense of being somehow an essential component, needed to be in a belief state or other; or that they are part of some sort of language of thought. Equally, this is not claiming that a belief that might naturally—but need not—be expressed with a sentence containing an indexical is a special attitude of sorts, *essentially* different from other beliefs. There are no *essentially indexical* beliefs or ideas in that sense. Not, at least, in Perry’s account. Most importantly here, there being such *essentially indexical* beliefs is not part of the challenge indexicals present for the notion of proposition and the standard view of beliefs as propositional attitudes.

<sup>7</sup> If the person who believes (1) does not know that the time of their belief is, actually, noon; and the person who believes (2) does not know that the time of their belief is noon.



in (1) and (2) (again, assuming the belief expressible by (2) happens at noon). Cases like this one –like the messy shopper and the lost hiker—are what Perry calls Type B cases: those where the same thing is done, in different ways.

Perry also discusses the opposite type of cases, Type A: those in which different things are done in the same way. To use another classic example by Perry (1977, 16), if Heimson and Hume both believe what they could express as:

3. I am Hume
4. I wrote the *Treatise*

they would both be in the same belief state. But what they believe, the proposition they believe is quite different. Hume believes of himself that is Hume and wrote the *Treatise*, which is true, and Heimson believes of himself that is Hume and wrote the *Treatise*, which is false.

Type B cases, with examples like the tardy professor with regards to “now” and the messy shopper with regards to “I” were specially designed to deal with the role beliefs play in explaining action. Even though, as we said, the content of the beliefs of the tardy professor is the same in (1) and in (2), the causal role they play in his subsequent actions is definitely different, and so is their cognitive significance. The tardy professor is in belief state (1) all along, but he is not in (2) until it is late for him to get to the meeting on time. His *coming to believe* (2)—that is, coming to the state belief (2)—causes him to stand up and run to the department’s meeting room.<sup>8</sup>

Type A cases, with examples like Heimson and Hume’s or Lewis’s two gods scenario are useful to explain “sameness of belief state,” or the role the proposition believed plays in accounting for what we believe, and in dealing with agreements and disagreements about what we believe.

Perry’s explanation for all these cases is similar. It involves the already mentioned difference between the *thing* believed and being in a certain *belief state*, and some modifications to what Perry calls “the doctrine of propositions,” which involves the following three tenets:

- i. Beliefs (and other cognitive attitudes) *consist in* relations to the propositions referred to by the ‘that’-clauses of attitude reports of the form “X believes that S.” S is the *embedded sentence*.
- ii. The truth-values of propositions do not depend on who asserts them or believes them, or when.
- iii. If X believes the proposition that S, that belief will lead X to regard S as true. That is, the proposition not only captures the

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<sup>8</sup> Provided, of course, that he has the desire to attend the meeting; and other external factors, such as he being able to run, the meeting room being close enough, etc.

truth-conditions of S, but also its cognitive content or cognitive significance, the beliefs that lead one to regard it as true. (Perry 2019, 5)

Perry argues for modifying the first tenet, keeping the second and rejecting the third.

The traditional notion of proposition, and the received view on propositional attitudes cannot accommodate indexically expressible beliefs. Both Fregean and singular propositions struggle with them. The received view of propositional attitudes, captured in the three claims above, cannot accommodate these cases, and the accompanying intuitions.

Perry and Lewis agree in this point. Lewis also defended that beliefs need to be classified in terms of roles or, as he called them, properties.

Propositions, Fregean or singular, are not enough. So it might be correct to talk about a “Perry-Lewis view,” if it is used to refer to the claim that we need to give up the doctrine of propositions. Or parts of it, at least. But Perry and Lewis do not agree on what needs to be rejected or kept from it and, most importantly, what should we substitute for it. I’ll say something more about this point of agreement, focusing on Perry’s account of indexicals. Then, I will shortly contrast his views with those of Prior and Lewis, following what he says about them in the book.

## Frege, “I”, and the order of quantifiers

Some of the features of the examples above are similar to Frege’s puzzles involving proper names. But, contrary to what negationists claim, some are clearly distinct. Frege was aware that indexicals raise particular problems, and, in his later works, he tried to accommodate them on his account. In his 1977 paper “Frege on demonstratives,” Perry argued that Frege failed in that attempt, and that indexicals (and demonstratives) demanded some amendments to Frege’s view. In his 1979 paper, he argued that alternative accounts on meaning and propositions—which understood them as singular—did not fare better in dealing with them.

Just like with proper names, we do not need to know much to be able to refer by using “I” or any other indexical, but we need to know something: the indexical’s role. “Role” is the term used by Perry to designate the functions that “take different people at different times who are in the same belief state to different things believed” (2019,12).<sup>9</sup> Consider Perry’s famous example,

<sup>9</sup> Perry term “role” is a generalization from Kaplan’s notion of character to beliefs: “Just as there were sentences that could be used to say different things, by different people at different times, there were *ways of believing* that constituted believing different things for different people at different times. In these cases, *what* was believed wouldn’t be a Fregean Thought, but a singular proposition.” (Perry, 2019, 11)

“the messy shopper.” Perry is following a trail of sugar on a supermarket floor. After a while, he realizes that the sugar is falling from a torn sack in his cart: he comes to believe that he is the one making a mess. Imagine he uses one of the following to express —aloud or to himself—his new belief:

5. John Perry is making  
a mess
6. I am making a mess

John Perry might have used (5) or (6) to express what he believed when he realized that *he* was making a mess. “John Perry” and “I” refer to the same person in (5) and (6), but if we substitute “I” for “John Perry,” the cognitive effects (and motivations) would radically differ. (6) would be perfectly normal if John Perry wants to express what he is doing at a particular moment in time. On Perry’s example, it is a natural way of expressing what he came to realize, i.e. that he was the one making a mess. He can now stop chasing the mysterious messy shopper, and start fixing the sugar sack in his own cart. (5) would be a true but weird and pompous way of saying what he realized and came to believe. On most contexts, believing that “John Perry is making a mess” would make him stop and fix the situation. This is because he knows that he is John Perry. But (5) would not make him check his cart if he doesn’t know he is John Perry, or if he thinks there is another person called “John Perry” at the store.<sup>10</sup>

Besides, upon hearing (6), anyone would understand that John Perry is expressing what he realized of believes he was doing; but only those who know that his name is “John Perry,” and that for some reason he is referring to himself in the third person, would directly understand this upon hearing (5). At the very least, they would be prompted to ask something like, “what do you mean, that you are the one making a mess?”

The role of the indexical gives the conditions to identify the referent, by determining how this referent is presented. The role of “I” indicates that the referent is the speaker of the utterance, or the agent of the belief, containing “I.” The referent —the speaker/agent— is thus presented in a certain way: in a first-person way. So, even if you do not know anything about John Perry, you will know that he is talking about his actions and his beliefs upon hearing him utter (6).

The role of an indexical however is not, and cannot be, a Fregean sense, because it gives us a different object on each occasion of use. Frege’s solution

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<sup>10</sup> These might seem quite extreme cases. After all, most of us remember our names, most of the times. And it is not quite often that we know there is people with the same name as us in a store. But similar considerations apply in the case of temporal indexicals, and it is certainly much more common to forget the date one lives on. This will be clear in Prior’s case, which we discuss in the next section.

to Frege's puzzles doesn't seem to work when indexicals are involved. And it doesn't because indexicals present different characteristics than names, and thus require a special treatment. Think of (5) and (6). Frege claimed that sentences express Thoughts and refer to truth-values. A Thought, for Frege, is a complete, objective and invariant entity. It is what we objectively understand when we understand a sentence, independently of our own particular thoughts or impressions about it. This, of course, is what guarantees communication. The Thought expressed by (5) is something like "John Perry is making a mess at t." The Thought expressed by (6), when John Perry is the speaker and assuming it is uttered at the same moment in time, would also be "John Perry is making a mess at t."

But this cannot be the end of the story. The Thought expressed by (5) would remain the same regardless of who utters it. The Thought expressed by (6) changes from speaker to speaker. How can they be the same Thought then? And how can the Thought expressed depend on who utters it? Assuming there is a sense associated to the "I," this sense would need to be different for each speaker, since, for each speaker, a different Thought is expressed upon uttering (5) above. But then, if these Thoughts are unique for each speaker, how can we communicate them?

Frege's writing on this issue are very few and came quite late in his career, mostly in his paper "Thought" (1918–1919). Consider his most often quoted paragraph on "I,"

Now everyone is presented to himself in a special and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else. So, when Dr Lauben has the thought that he was wounded, he will probably be basing it on this primitive way in which he is presented to himself. And only Dr Lauben himself can grasp thoughts specified in this way. But now he may want to communicate with others. He cannot communicate a thought he alone can grasp. Therefore, if he now says "I was wounded," he must use "I" in a sense which can be grasped by others, perhaps in the sense of "he who is speaking to you at this moment;" by doing this he makes the conditions accompanying his utterance serve towards the expression of a thought (Frege. 1918–9: 333. Note omitted)

The idea that each of us is presented to ourselves in a special way is of course old. At first sight, Frege seems to be appealing to the common idea that we are aware of ourselves in a first-person way; i.e. that there is an important difference between first-person and third-person knowledge. Nothing particularly problematic here. Unless we attempt to accommodate it within Frege's account of senses as complete, objective Thoughts.

Actually, it is not entirely clear what Frege is saying in the above paragraph. The first sentence, in particular, admits two readings, as Perry (2019: 8–9, 52–3) points out. Frege might be saying that there is a special and primitive way in which each person is presented to oneself, and that this is

different to the way she is presented to others. This is a pretty uncontroversial claim, and it is difficult to see why Frege would find it troublesome.

But there is a second reading, according to which each person has one special and primitive way of presenting to oneself, which only that person can grasp and which she cannot therefore communicate. This particular and primitive way of presenting to oneself is a primitive way of knowing about oneself, and it is expressed with particular and primitive Thoughts: Thoughts that only each of us can grasp. In other words, a person cannot communicate the Thoughts grasped in this particular and primitive way.

The difference between the two ways of understanding Frege involves a change the order of the quantifiers. On the first reading, the one favored by Perry to explain self-knowledge, what Frege would be saying is that,

There is a particular and primitive way in which every person is presented to himself, and no one else (2019, 9)

On the second reading, which seems to be the one Frege intended, what he is saying is that,

For each person, there is a particular and primitive way in which he is presented to himself and no one else... and no one else can grasp Thoughts determined this way (2019, 8–9)

On this second reading, if Dr. Lauben utters, “I am wounded,” he would be expressing a Thought only he can grasp and one that, therefore, he cannot communicate. That Thought includes the sense of “I,” which includes the primitive and particular way of presenting himself and which determines Dr. Lauben as the referent. Since only he can *access* himself in that particular way, only he can grasp the sense associated with “I,” and the Thought expressed by the sentence “I am wounded” (when uttered by him, of course). In Frege’s terms: “only Dr. Lauben himself can grasp thoughts specified in this way... He cannot communicate a thought he alone can grasp.” This reading is, clearly, much more controversial.

If this is right, Frege’s claim in this paragraph entails that each of us has their own particular mode of presenting oneself to our self, a mode that is particular to each of us, only accessible by each one and, in that sense, incommunicable. A person “cannot communicate a thought he alone can grasp.” After all, communicating it would be to make it accessible for others. In Perry’s terms, “What is needed is a primitive aspect of me, which is not simply one that only I am aware of myself as having, but that I alone have” (1977: 15).

But then, we would need to accept that some Thoughts are not objective and graspable to all. That some senses are of limited accessibility. Considering the efforts Frege put in his earlier publications in specifying the role Thoughts play in communication and their objective nature, making them different from subjective ideas and thoughts, it certainly seems an odd admission on his part.

This, roughly stated, is the conclusion Perry reached in his 1977 paper, and the problem he tried to solve (in that and in the 1979 paper).

Frege's puzzles about proper names raise many issues, but, contrary to what negationists like Cappelen and Dever, Millikan or Magidor claim, they are not the same as the puzzles raised by indexicals. The solution Frege gives to the puzzles regarding proper names becomes insufficient when it comes to indexicals. Something needs to be added, or changed.

An important point of Perry's solution is reversing the order of the quantifiers, as shown above. With this, we avoid non-communicable and non-objective belief contents. Many accounts of indexically expressible beliefs ignore the possibility of this second reading. And many reconstructions of what Perry and Lewis said about them take them to be adopting Frege's order of quantifiers; with all the consequences this implies. Thus, for instance, García-Carpintero takes Perry to be committed to the "non shareability" or "non objectivity" of first-person thoughts *de se* (2017), and Holton takes Lewis's *de se* beliefs to be "non communicable" (2015). They are both wrong, I believe.<sup>11</sup>

Thoughts about the present moment—or the present day—fare no better on Frege's account. And they fare no better on an account of indexically expressible beliefs as non-shareable or non-absolute. Quite the contrary.

### **Perry, Prior, and the order of quantifiers**

Consider Arthur Prior's famous paragraph, which includes utterances and a different cognitive attitude: relief.

[H]alf the time I personally have forgotten what the date *is* and have to look it up or ask somebody when I need it for writing cheques, etc.; yet even in this perpetual dateless haze one somehow communicates, one makes oneself understood, and with time references too. One says, e.g. "Thank goodness that's over!" [...] says something which it is impossible that any use of a tenseless copula with a date should convey. It certainly doesn't mean the same as, e.g. "Thank goodness the date of the conclusion of that thing is Friday, June 15, 1954," even if it be said then. (Nor, for that matter, does it mean "Thank goodness the conclusion of that thing is contemporaneous with this utterance." Why would anyone thank goodness for that?). (Prior 1959: 17)

Suppose Arthur is leaving the dentist's office after undergoing a painful root canal. What is it that makes him exclaim (7), and not (8) or (9) in these circumstances?

7. Thank goodness that episode is/be over as of now.

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<sup>11</sup> See Falk (manuscript) for a discussion of Holton's claim.

8. Thank goodness that episode is/be over as of 2 p.m. June 15, 1954.
9. Thank goodness that episode is/be over as of the time of this utterance.

The short answer is that these utterances, by the same person at the same time, would have different cognitive significance. (7) seems to express relief on its own. (8) would require some supplementation to express relief (i.e. today is Friday, June 15, 1954). (9) is a very odd sentence to utter coming out of the dentist—or in any circumstance that does not include a philosophy seminar.

So, in a sense, the three utterances *mean* something different. They convey or display different information: one might believe (7) and not believe (8)—and vice versa—and the causal role they play is also different. If Arthur is talking to a good friend, (7) should cause the friend being happy for him; (8) would only manage that if the friend knows the time and date of the utterance—and knows that Arthur knows this, and somehow understands why he is using (8) rather than (7).<sup>12</sup>

But, of course, the content expressed by the utterances, and the content of Arthur's relief, what he is relieved about, is the same: that the root canal is over as of the time of the utterance (which happens to be 2 p.m. June 15, 1954).

So, Prior's example is very similar to Perry's cases. And it is clearly designed to show how sentences containing indexicals are adequate to express cognitive attitudes such as relief, and sentences containing dates are not.<sup>13</sup>

Prior's paper, however, has been often interpreted as a defense of the existence of A-properties of time, and their primacy over B-properties. That is, as a defense of an ontological claim, rather than a discussion about indexicals and indexically expressible attitudes. Cappelen and Dever, for instance, consider an ontological interpretation described, but not endorsed, by Ted Sider (on an online document, no longer available). According to them "the argument, if it succeeds provides evidence that attitudes like relief don't attach to B-facts, but that's not even the beginning of an argument for a distinctive kind of opacity arising in connection with indexicals" (2013, 67). They do not believe, of course, that there is anything philosophically interesting in the differences between (7)-(9), other than a question of opacity. Here too, they offer Fregean counterparts (Perry discusses these counterparts, and Prior's example, on chapter 9 of his book). They seem to believe, however, that Prior's argument, contrary to Perry's, might be interesting *as* and ontological one.

I do not think this is correct. First, because I do not think Prior's argument should be seen as an ontological defense of A-properties (de Ponte and Korta,

<sup>12</sup> (9) would probably leave the friend concerned about Arthur's sanity.

<sup>13</sup> At least on most circumstances. See de Ponte and Korta (2017).

2017). Prior is a well-known defender of presentism, and he does defend an A-theory of time on many of his writings. This might explain, in part, why his example is often seen as having ontological consequences. But there is nothing in his paper to indicate that he is making an ontological claim. In any case, even if it were to be read like that, I cannot see how it would prove that relief is not “attached” —whatever that means—to B-facts. Cappelen and Dever do not explain how this is so.

More importantly for us here, however, is that Prior’s interest in opacity is nowhere to be seen in the paragraph quoted or in the paper. Prior does not say that the truth-value of (7) and (9), when uttered at the same time as the example suggest, is different. According to Cappelen and Dever:

Suppose now = time t. Then (1\*) – “I am relieved that the event is over now”– and (2\*) – “I am relieved that the event is over at time t”– get different truth values, because “now” and “t” aren’t intersubstitutable. (2013, 67).

But this is far from clear. They could have different truth values. But it is plausible to think, as defenders of singular propositions do, that (7)-(9) are different ways of reporting the *same* thing. Granted, (2\*) would be a true, but misleading and quite weird report. But not false. If this is so, they would have the same truth-value. What Perry calls a Type A case: different ways to do the same thing.<sup>14</sup>

Once again, as Perry claims, Cappelen and Dever confuse opacity with cognitive significance; and they fail to see the particularities of indexicals with regards to the latter. Negationists in general, and Cappelen and Dever in particular, fail to see the philosophical interest of the paper, because they fail to understand the issue it deals with: how is it that two utterances that seem to express the same proposition —because they are utterances of sentences with co-referential terms— are not both appropriate in one circumstance? Why is (7) the right choice, and not (8) or (9), if the three seem to *say the same thing*?

Prior’s example, and Prior’s views on indexicals, anticipate many of the claims made by Perry and Lewis twenty years later. Actually, Prior’s views on the “now” was very much influenced by Castañeda. Another point of contact with Perry.<sup>15</sup> Just as it happens with Perry’s examples the “order of the quantifiers” is key to see Prior’s example as requiring additions to our

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<sup>14</sup> Also, notice that their reconstruction of the example is quite different from the original. Prior’s examples were *expressions* of an attitude: relief. Cappelen and Dever’s are *reports* of relief. Arguably of course, Arthur reports his relief when he expresses it —by exclaiming “thank goodness...” But the reporting seems to be secondary to the expressing. Or so it seems to me.

<sup>15</sup> Prior (1968). See de Ponte (2017) for a discussion of Castañeda’s influence on Prior.



ontology or, rather, as additions to the ways we classify cognitive episodes—relief—and utterances.

It seems obvious that there is a particular way in which we are all presented with whatever is happening at a certain time, at *that* time. That is, that there is a special way in which present events are presented to us, quite different to the ways future or past events are presented. At a moment of time *t* we have a particular access to events, or things that happen at *t*: we can perceive them. We cannot perceive events that haven't happened yet, or events that have already happened.

But, of course, that doesn't mean that we cannot communicate *what* we perceive, or *what* we believe or think about present events at other times. And it doesn't mean that we will not have access to them at future moments of times. This would only be the case if we apply Frege's preferred order of quantifiers and accept something like: that there is a particular and primitive way in which present events, and only present events, are presented to the agent... and from no other moment of time can the Thoughts determined this way be grasped.

So, just as, on Frege's preferred order of quantifiers, only I can grasp the content of a thought or a belief about myself. Because only I can access me *as myself*. Only when at moment *t* we can grasp the content of a thought or a belief about *t*. Because only at that moment we can access to that moment, and the events happening then, *as the present*.

This way of looking at things quite naturally leads to the claim that there is something particular about the present moment; some property or feature we can only capture when we are at *that* moment, and that we cannot revive before or afterwards. This special property or feature is an A-property: the event we are perceiving has the property of being present, and, after the moment passes, it will lose it and get the property of being past. Time flows, and moments in time gain and lose properties constantly. That particular and primitive way of getting to know present events is, basically, the fact that we can only perceive the property of "presentness," when we are present. After the moment passes, the that property is lost. The content of a believe about a present moment *t* cannot be replicated when the *t* is future, or past.

This way of seeing things might be, as we said, the natural conclusion if we follow Frege's preferred order of quantifiers. But it is certainly not the natural conclusion is we follow Perry's preferred order of quantifiers: There is a particular and primitive way in which the events happening at each moment are presented at *that* moment, and not at any other moment.

It seems that what we require here are different ways of knowing or accessing events that happen at different moments of time. So, there is a primitive way in which we can know what is happening now: perception. We cannot perceive past or future events; we can remember or anticipate them. Not because these events gain or lose properties, but because of our temporal

location with regards to them. The ontological conclusion does not follow. Or, rather, it does not follow as *naturally* as before.<sup>16</sup>

Arthur is thankful, at time  $t$ , about the conclusion of an event by  $t$ . He is thankful, presumably, because it is in the past; that is, because he cannot perceive that painful event anymore. Whether or not that event, or the moment of time in which it occurs, have or doesn't have a certain property seems quite irrelevant. Arthur is not thankful because his root canal has the property of "being past;" he is thankful that he cannot perceive it anymore. Further, to account for the difference among (7)-(9), the nature and properties of  $t$  don't seem very relevant. That is, whether or not  $t$  is a static moment of time in a series of ordered moments of time (B-series); or a moment of time that has the property of being present at the time of (7), had the property of being future before (7) and has the property of being past after (7) (A-series).

### Perry, Lewis, and some conclusions

Perry's approach to indexicals gives us the necessary tools to deal with them without complicating our ontology *unnecessarily*. This ontological "simplicity" entails, however, a certain complexity in the way we understand and classify beliefs and other metal states. This complexity is what Lewis tried to avoid with his proposal. But, by doing so, he complicated ontology substantially.

Perry and Lewis claim that their views are, or could be, compatible. Lewis acknowledges this in his 1979 paper. Perry proposes a possible interpretation of Lewis compatible with his own, on chapter 12 of *Revisiting the Essential Indexical*. Lewis and Perry agree that sentences containing indexicals, and indexically expressible beliefs, generate problems for the doctrine of propositions. They disagree on the extent of these problems and on the way to solve them. Lewis considers Heimson and Hume's example:<sup>17</sup>

The second problem arises when we ask why Heimson is wrong. He believes he is Hume. Hume believed that too. Hume was right. If Hume believed he was Hume by believing a proposition, that proposition was true. Heimson believes just what Hume did. But Hume and Heimson are worldmates. Any proposition true for Hume is likewise true for

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<sup>16</sup> The issues Prior's example rises are complex. I do not intend to say that, with Frege's preferred order of quantifiers the ontological reading follows *necessarily*, or that the ontological reading does not or cannot follow from Perry's preferred order of quantifiers. I just want to say that it follows more *naturally* from the first, and that Perry's preferred order of quantifiers allows us a much simpler explanation.

<sup>17</sup> Many of Lewis's arguments are focused on the problems indexicals generate for the possible world theory of propositions. Perry does not defend, or discuss on his 77/79 papers that theory.

Heimson. So Heimson, like Hume, believes he is Hume by believing a true proposition. So he's right. But he's not right. He's wrong, because he believes he's Hume and he isn't.

There are two ways out. (1) Heimson does not, after all, believe what Hume did. Or (2) Heimson does believe what Hume did, but Heimson believes falsely what Hume believed truly. (1979, 525)

Perry's way out is the first: Heimson and Hume believe different things, but they are both in the same belief state, which they would naturally express with (5) "I am Hume." By being in that belief state, the content of Heimson belief is that "Heimson is Hume," which is false, and the content of Hume's is that "Hume is Hume," which is true.

Lewis disagrees. He acknowledges that there "is *some* sense that Heimson does not believe what Hume did." But claims that there must be a "central an important sense" in which they "believe alike." He rejects Perry's explanation:

Heimson may have got his head into perfect match with Hume's in every way that is at all relevant to what he believes. If nevertheless Heimson and Hume do not believe alike, then *beliefs ain't in the head!* They depend partly on something else, so that if your head is in a certain state and you're Hume you believe one thing, but if your head is in that state and you're Heimson you believe something else. Not good. The main purpose of assigning objects to attitudes is, I take it, to characterize states of the head; to specify their causal roles with respect to behavior, stimuli, and one another. If the assignment of objects depends partly on something besides the state of the head, it will not serve this purpose. The states it characterizes will not be the occupant of the causal roles." (1979, 575–576)

Lewis thinks that it is "not good" to have two ways of classifying beliefs: by their content and the belief state the person is in. He claims that that would jeopardize the purpose of assigning contents to beliefs; of deciding *what* one believes. Having two components in the classification, as Perry does, is too complex, according to Lewis.<sup>18</sup>

It might seem obvious that classifying anything using one parameter is simpler than using two. But it all depends, of course, on how we flesh out that one parameter. On Lewis's case, among other things, it involves accepting a

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<sup>18</sup> There are many things to unravel from these two paragraphs above. What does Lewis mean by Heimson having his head "into perfect match" with Hume's, for instance, is difficult to understand. Also, as Perry notes (2019, 116) Lewis uses the term "object of belief" in a peculiar way.

very particular notion of “property,” and the existence of possible worlds.<sup>19</sup> According to most interpretations, it also involves a new and primitive attitude, self-ascription. Self-ascription, according to this interpretation, is primitive and it is a one-place relation: one self-ascribes a property. There is no two-place relation between the agent and the property. The property is in the head, in the agent’s mind, and the agent simply self-ascribes it.

That Lewis is defending the existence of a special and primitive attitude, is a widely accepted claim. So much so, that it is often attributed to Perry as well, as if it were an integral part of any explanation of the role of indexicals and of indexically expressible beliefs. Magidor, for instance, considers that the following is a central tenet of “the myth of the *de se*,” defended by both Perry and Lewis:

There is a special class of propositional (or “propositional-like”) attitudes. These are *self-locating* or *de se* attitudes, ones that are typically expressed using indexical expressions such as “I” and “now” (call this claim “*Special Attitudes*”) (2015, 249)<sup>20</sup>

This is simply wrong. It should be clear by now that Perry does not defend the existence of a special and primitive attitude. More surprising is his preferred interpretation of Lewis, according to which he didn’t either. According to this, on Lewis’s theory, “to say that one “self-ascribes” a property is simply a misleading way of saying that one is in a belief state the causal role of which is captured by the property. Self-ascription is not a newly discovered attitude” (2019, 132–33).

It is not easy to know whether this interpretation is accurate or not. Lewis’s undeniable originality and his idiosyncratic use of terminology make proper understanding difficult at times. It doesn’t help that his views have been discussed, interpreted and used very often and in various ways. But so have been Perry’s. I am inclined to give credit to Perry’s way of understanding Lewis’s notion of self-ascription, and Lewis’s theory in general. It does not contradict Lewis’s text, as far as I can tell, and it certainly makes Lewis’s theory more palatable.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis claimed that these worlds were concrete entities. Not many people believe that. Lewis took properties to be sets of possible worlds, or “world-bound time-slices.” His view is often rendered as the view that the contents of attitudes are sets of centered worlds: triples consisting of a world, a time, and an individual. See Liao (2012).

<sup>20</sup> She is not alone in attributing this view to Perry. See, for instance, García-Carpintero (2017).

<sup>21</sup> Not at least with regards to self-ascription. Lewis says: “The main purpose of assigning objects of attitudes is, I take it, to characterize states of the head; to specify their causal roles with respect to behavior, stimuli, and one another” (Lewis, 1979, 526. Quoted in Perry, 2019, 130). On Perry’s interpretation of Lewis, however, not all beliefs are *de se*. Lewis explicitly says they are. So, this will need to be cleared out.

The above paragraphs, of course, are not meant to be a presentation of Lewis's proposal. My aim is just to argue that talk about a "Perry-Lewis" view on indexically expressible beliefs is misleading, and it very easily leads to confusions, attributing to one author the views of the other. For similar reasons, calling self-locating beliefs, and indexically expressible beliefs, in general, "*de se* beliefs" is not accurate, to say the least. Simplifying very much, *de se* beliefs is the term used by Lewis, who defined them as consisting in the self-attribution of properties. He claimed that all beliefs are *de se* beliefs. Perry does not believe that indexically expressible beliefs, and, in particular, self-locating beliefs, consist in self-attributions, or on any relation between the agent and a property (or any other entity, for that matter). He did not claim either that all beliefs are self-locating or indexically expressible beliefs.

Negationists like Cappelen and Dever, however, do not object to particular details of Perry's and Lewis's theories, but to what they both have in common: the need to modify the first tenet of the doctrine of propositions; that is, the claim that propositions —Fregean, singular, structured or possible-world— are not enough to classify beliefs; that beliefs do not *consist* in a relation with one proposition.<sup>22</sup>

Cappelen and Dever are particularly worried about "perspectivism," both in Perry and in Lewis. They think Lewis, Perry and all their "followers" cannot offer a notion of content "as an objective representation of the world" (2013, 173). But, clearly, Cappelen and Dever confuse self-ascription of properties (*de se*) or indexically expressible beliefs with the ascription of perspectival properties or the belief of essentially indexical contents. As Falk neatly puts it "It is a wonder, given their own appeal for objective properties in their last chapter, that they would not see the essential indexical is about locating oneself, not in a seeming world, but in the objective real world." (2015, 428)

That Perry does not defend perspectivism in this sense is, I think, clear. In his book, Perry explains how Lewis's proposal doesn't lead to it either. He does so, mostly, on chapter 12, where he compares his views with Lewis's, and offers a new and original interpretation of Lewis's proposal. This is a key chapter of the book, and I believe Perry's interpretation of Lewis deserves much more attention than what has received so far. If only because it makes Lewis's proposal plausible and simpler than the usual interpretations. Also, because it makes it compatible with folk-psychology and the way we normally understand beliefs and our means to express them.

I've already said that Perry's book answers to negationists's criticisms. I hope I have also shown how this short book does much more than this. It does

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<sup>22</sup> It does not consist on a relation with several propositions either, as some people have thought Perry defends on his later works. See de Ponte, Korta and Perry (2023) for a clarification of this point.

a great job at clarifying Perry's claims in his classic 1977 and 1979 papers, answering many common misinterpretations; and it offers new and original proposals on, among others, Prior's "thank goodness that's over" paper and on Lewis's theory. It does all this in a clear, well-informed and very entertaining way. This book should definitely be read by all interested in the philosophy of language and mind, and especially by those interested in issues related to the essential indexical and/or the *de se*.

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