

Phil 490: *Consciousness and the Self*

Handout [20]

John Perry: *The Problem of the Essential Indexical*

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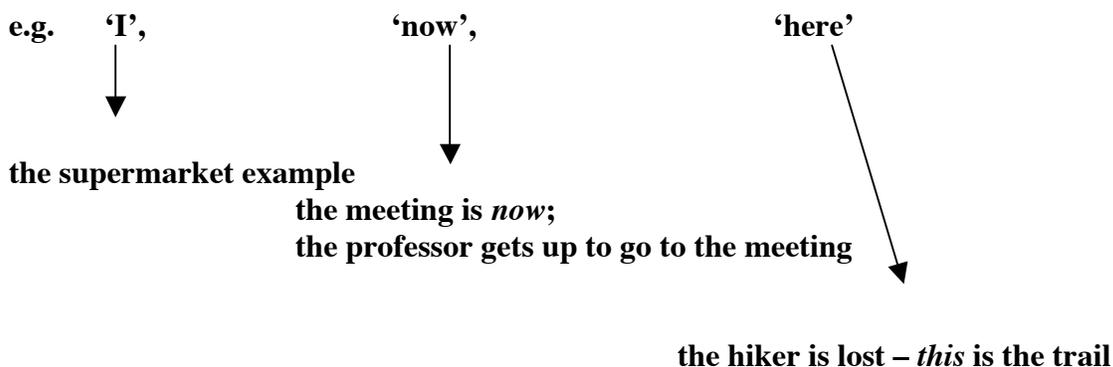
§ Essential Indexicals

[Indexical]:

___ A term whose full meaning is dependent on the extra-linguistic context in which it is used. Words such as “you,” “this,” “now,” and “there” are indexicals.

[Essential Indexical]:

___ A term is an essential indexical when it cannot be replaced with any other designation without losing the same explanatory force of the subject’s behavior.



* Try to find ways to paraphrase the proposition

→ However you paraphrase it, you cannot get rid of the indexicals.

§ The Problem of Essential Indexicals

___ It is a problem for the view that belief is a relation between a subject and a proposition conceived as the “bearer” of truth and falsity.

§ Belief

‘locating belief’

= locating one’s belief about where one is, when it is, and who one is.

1. Our beliefs are not always characterizable by a set of “eternal sentences” —
___ Those sentences which do not express a perspective from within a space-time. They have a truth-value in an absolute sense, as opposed to merely

- being true or false for a person or at a time.** (e.g. In 1970 American women exceed American men in wealth.)
2. Two campers with the same guidebook disagree on where they are on the map.
→ There has to be some indexical element in the characterization of their beliefs to bring out this disagreement.

§ **The Target View: Frege's Theory (The Traditional Theory of Belief) = *The Doctrine of Proposition***

[T1]: **Belief is a relation between a subject and a proposition, that is being denoted by a that-clause.**

[T2]: **Propositions have a truth value in an absolute sense, as opposed to merely being true for a person or at a time.**

[T3]: **It is necessary, but not sufficient, for proposition *S* and proposition *S'* to be the same, that they have the same truth value.**

[T3']: **If that S = that S', then *S* and *S'* must have the same *sense* (propositions must not only have the same truth value, and concern the same objects and relations, but must also involve the same concepts.)**

(If subject A would believe *S* but not *S'*, then they are not the same proposition.)

§ **The Problem of the Essential Indexical:**

John Perry: I believe that I am making a mess.

Q: What is the object (the propositional content) of his belief?

___ 'I am making a mess' is not true or false absolutely; it therefore identify a proposition.

Q: **What is the missing conceptual ingredient?**

*** To identify the proposition I came to believe, the advocate of the doctrine of propositions must identify this missing conceptual ingredient.**

___ Even if we can find α -- a concept which I alone "fit," any such explanation will work only on the assumption that I believe that I was α .

The Problem:

___ **There is a *missing conceptual ingredient*: a sense for which I am the reference, or a complex of properties I alone have, or a singular term that refers to no one but me.**

___ The problem of the essential indexical reveals that something is badly wrong with the traditional doctrine of propositions.

§ The Problem of Substitution Failure and Proposed Solutions

[The substitution failure]

- (1) Patrick believes that the dean of the school is wise.
- (2) The dean of the school = Frank's neighbor.
- (3) Therefore, Patrick believes that Frank's neighbor is wise.

However, Patrick doesn't know that Frank's neighbor is the dean of the school. So (3) is false.

[Proposed solution #1: *de re* /*de dicto* belief]

___ We make substitution only outside of the proposition. No substitution is allowed within a *de dicto* belief report.

E.g.

Patrick believes that the Dean is wise.

→ There is someone such that Patrick believes that he is wise.

Or: → Patrick believes *of a* that he is wise.

X believes of y that he is so and so

→ **There is a concept α such that α fits y and x believes that α is so and so.**

*** Perry's criticism: The approach of explaining *de re* beliefs in terms of *de dicto* belief is incorrect, because the problem of the essential indexical is still with us.**

___ I can believe that I am making a mess, even if there is no concept α such that I alone fit α and I believe that α is making a mess. So, even allowing *de re* belief, we still don't have an account of the belief I acquired.

[Proposed solution #2: Relativize propositions to the believer (true or false *at a person*)]

→ **A proposition should be relativized to a person at a time.**

___ On our amended doctrine of proposition, this ascribes a relation between *me* and *that I am making a mess*. There is no missing conceptual ingredient.

*** Perry's criticism: We need to separate the context of belief and the context of evaluation**

___ The time of belief and the person doing the believing cannot be generally identified with the person and the time relative to which the proposition believed is held true. You may believe that *I am making a mess* was true for me, but you certainly don't believe it is true for you now, unless you are reading this in the supermarket. Let us call *you* and *now* the context of belief, and *me* and *then* the context of evaluation. The two contexts may be the same, but need not be (for me the two contexts are the same, but for you they are not.)

___ Even when the two contexts collapse, there is still the chance that the person does not see the reference is the *I* or the *now*. A tardy professor believes that the meeting starts at noon, and this proposition is true at noon, but he is not going to move unless he believes: my meeting starts *now*.

[Proposed solution #3: Limited Accessibility]

___ Some propositions are special in that they have limited accessibility. When the proposition involves “I” for example, the proposition is *inaccessible* to others. Same with ‘now’ – once that time has past, the proposition becomes inaccessible. We can still identify it, but we cannot express it with those words any longer, for with each passing moment they express a different proposition. And we can find no other words to express it.

* **Perry’s criticism:** This view assumes that the universe has myriads of private perspectives. I have no knock-down argument against such propositions, or the metaphysical schemes that find room for them. But I believe only in a common actual world, and I do not think the phenomenon of essential indexicals forces me to abandon this view.

§ Perry’s Theory: The Obvious Solution?

Perry’s Own Solution:

___ **There is no *de dicto* proposition that all the campers or shoppers or professors believe. We must incorporate *the indexical element* into what is believed.**

➔ We are clearly classifying the shoppers, campers, and professors into groups corresponding to what we have been calling “relativized propositions” — abstract objects corresponding to sentences containing indexicals. But what members of each group have in common, is **not belief that a certain relativized proposition is true. What they have in common instead, is the same belief *state*.**

What he proposes is:

- (i) The believers do not believe in some fixed proposition, relativized or not.
- (ii) What these believers share in common is not propositional content of belief, but their belief states.
- (iii) But although they are all in the same belief state, they do not all have the same belief.
- (iv) The proposal is that there is not an identity, or even an isomorphic correspondence, but only a systematic relationship between the belief states one is in and what one thereby believes.

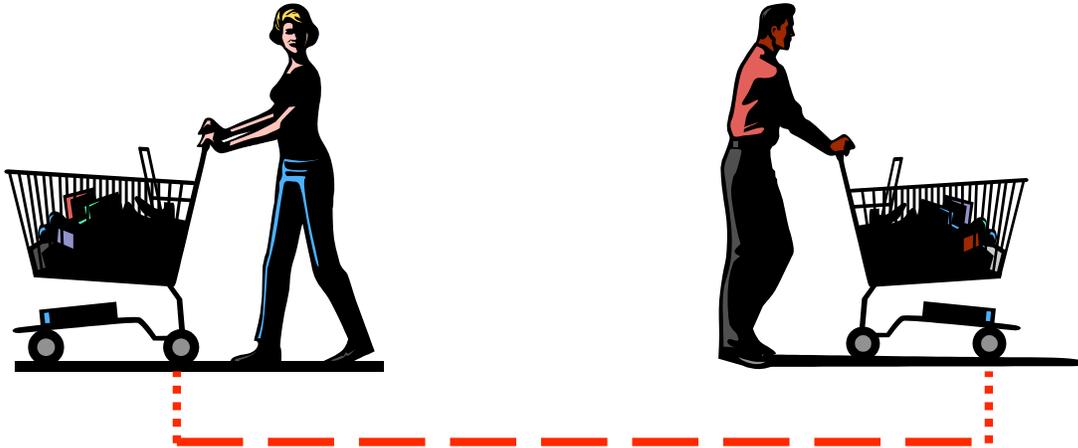
§ Perry’s Claims on Belief

1. Sameness of belief ≠ sameness of belief state

2. Sameness of belief \neq believing the same thing, having the relation of belief to the same object

___ Two people may be in the same belief state (e.g. two shoppers believing each of them to be making a mess without having the same belief.

___ Two people may have the same belief (e.g., I believe that I am making a mess and you believe that I am making a mess) without being in the same belief state.



3. It is the sameness of belief states that plays a role in explanation and prediction.

___ If two people are in the same belief state (+ the same desire), then they would do the same thing, *ceteris paribus*.)

4. Sameness of belief states does not require sameness of propositional contents of belief.

5. Belief state =

a. The structure of the sentence +

b. Context (time + identity)

→ *de re* propositions

§ Conclusion

1. *De dicto* (of propositions) beliefs are not central in the philosophy of belief.
2. The object of belief is not the proposition, but the actual object (e.g, the *I* in this case).
3. Therefore, the propositional theory of belief is wrong.
4. The problem of the essential indexical should teach us that no philosophy of belief can be plausible that does not take account of the distinction between belief states and objects of belief.