Perry: The Problem of the Essential Indexical

The Examples

All the examples contain uses of indexicals that Perry will argue are ineliminable—in each case, the speaker's belief cannot be expressed in language that does not contain indexicals. These are what Perry calls *locating beliefs*—"beliefs about where one is, when it is, and who one is" (p. 367, right).

The Careless Shopper

John believes that the shopper with a torn sack is making a mess. But he does not rearrange his cart—he just keeps walking around the store, trying unsuccessfully to catch up. Then he makes the sudden realization that **he** is the shopper with a torn sack. And so he acquires a new belief, as he puts it: "**I** am making a mess."

The Tardy Professor

The professor believes that the meeting starts at noon. Noon arrives, but he does not move. Then he notices the time, and begins to move. He has acquired a new belief, as he puts it, "The meeting starts **now**."

The Lost Hiker

An author stands in the wilderness, desiring to leave. He believes that the Mt. Tallac trail is the way out of the wilderness, but he is lost. Finally, he starts to walk. He has acquired a new belief, as he puts it, "**This** is the Mt. Tallac trail."

In each case, if we replace the indexical with another (non-indexical) term with the same denotation (in the context), we get a sentence that does not express what the agent has come to believe.

The Careless Shopper again

John started out believing that the shopper with a torn sack was making a mess. He did not believe then that **he** was making a mess. One might express this as a difference between propositions believed:

1. <property of *being the shopper with a torn sack*, property of *making a mess*>

2. <John, property of *making a mess*>

On this line, one might say that John at first believed (1) but did not believe (2), and eventually came to believe (2). Presumably, he did this by coming to believe:

3. <John, property of *being the shopper with a torn sack*>

At that point he put (1) and (3) together and realized, as he put it at the time, "**I** am making a mess."

(2) is a singular proposition, but (1) is not. So one might think that the difference is just the difference between a belief in a general proposition and a belief in a singular one. But, as Perry goes on to show, this will not work. We can see why more clearly if we look more closely at the second case.

The Tardy Professor again

I'll assume that the tardy professor is also John. John started out believing that the meeting starts at noon. He did not believe that the time was **then** noon. Suppose we try to express this (as we did above) as a difference between propositions believed:

1. <noon, property of *being the starting time of the meeting*>

2. <_____, property of *being the starting time of the meeting*>

> We'll let 'noon' abbreviate the more precise specification,
> say, 'noon on October 16, 1978')

Here, both are singular propositions. (1) is what John started out believing. But how do we fill the blank to get belief (2)? In the Careless Shopper case, we plugged in the proper name of the shopper. But if we try that in (2), we just get (1) all over again. ('Noon' is the proper name of the time at which the meeting starts.) And if we plug in 'now' we no longer have a propositional content.

In fact, there doesn't seem to be **any** singular proposition that expresses the content of the belief that John acquired when he realized, as he put it at the time, "The meeting starts **now**." This should give us reason to suspect that our move in the Careless Shopper case will not work either.

Perry's contention is that **locating beliefs are essentially indexical**. He establishes this by showing that neither the "traditional" theory of belief ("The Doctrine of Propositions") nor a non-traditional theory of (so-called) "*de re*" belief can properly account for locating beliefs.

The Doctrine of Propositions

There are three crucial ingredients:

1. Belief is a relation between a believer and a proposition (something denoted by a *that*-clause).

2. Propositions (the objects of belief) have absolute truth-value. (That is, the truth-value of a proposition is not context-dependent, does not vary from context to context.)

3. The individuation of propositions is "fine-grained" and involves more than just truth-values and truth-conditions. That is, that-S = that-S' only if the sentences expressing them, S and S', have the same sense.

The Failure of both *de re* and *de* dicto analyses

De dicto vs. *De re*

This is a distinction between two kinds of belief **ascriptions**. In a *de dicto* belief ascription, substitutivity may fail. That is, construed as *de dicto* belief ascriptions, these two statements can both be true:

> Patrick believes that the dean is wise.
> Patrick does not believes that Frank's neighbor is wise.

even though the dean = Frank's neighbor.

That's because we take Patrick's belief to be directed to the **proposition** *that the dean is wise*—"de dicto" means "concerning the dictum (thing said, proposition)." And *that Frank's neighbor is wise* is a different proposition from the proposition that the dean is wise.

But if our belief report is intended to identify the person about whom he has the belief (rather than the sentence he accepts or the proposition he is committed to), we might take it this way:

> It's the dean that Patrick believes to be wise.

And from this, and the fact that the dean = Frank's neighbor, it does indeed follow that:

> It's Frank's neighbor that Patrick believes to be wise.

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Which might very well be expressed by:

> Patrick believes that Frank's neighbor is wise.

This is a *de re* belief ascription. ("De re" means "concerning the thing.") So in *de re* belief ascriptions, substitutivity works (by the very definition of '*de re* belief ascription').

Perry argues that there is neither a *de dicto* nor a *de re* analysis of belief ascriptions that will work for "essentially indexical" beliefs such as *I believe that I am making a mess*, *I believe that the meeting starts now*, etc.

De dicto

The doctrine of propositions is, in effect, committed to the idea that all belief ascriptions are *de dicto*. The problem is that the proposition expressed by a sentence containing an indexical cannot itself contain an indexical. (That's because requirement (2) means that there can be no indexicals in propositions). So the doctrine of propositions must supply the right conceptual ingredient to replace the indexical. But it cannot do this. Some failed efforts:

> "The shopper with a torn sack is making a mess."

> "John Perry is making a mess."

These will not work, because the shopper who is making a mess may well hold these beliefs (i.e., give assent to these sentences) without believing that **he** is making a mess. That's because he may not believe that **he** is the shopper with a torn sack, or that **he** is John Perry. That is, he may not be prepared to assert:

> "I am the shopper with a torn sack."

> "I am John Perry."

If he were to hold one of these beliefs, the conclusion (that **he** is making a mess) would follow. But in these expressions of belief the essential indexical returns.

De re

De re belief (which we will study more next, with Quine) was devised as an alternative to the doctrine of propositions—a way of construing belief as a 3-place relation between a believer, an object, and a property (instead of a 2-place relation between a believer and a proposition).

On this proposal, the shopper's belief relates the believer, John, to himself and the property of making a mess:

<John, John, the property *making a mess*>

This proposal should look familiar: the object of belief in this case is just the ordered pair of the last two items:

<John, the property *making a mess*>

In other words, what Kaplan calls a *singular proposition*. Cf. Perry, p. 370, left:

"… a new sort of proposition, consisting of an object or sequence of objects and a conceptual ingredient…"

But the problem with *de re* beliefs is that they don't contain a conceptual ingredient that can be guaranteed to pick out in the right way the object about which the belief is held. It is not enough for John to believe, of John, that he is making a mess. That condition might obtain if he were to see (unbeknownst to him) a mirror image of a mirror image of a man pushing a grocery cart from which sugar was spilling, when the man in mirror turned out to be John himself! He has to believe this **content**, but in a first-person way (**character**). And the *de re* belief content:

<John, the property *making a mess*>

does not guarantee this. From a given belief **content**, nothing follows about the **character** under which it is believed. (Recall the example of Kaplan's Pants. If I believe a given content under the character *his pants are on fire*, I may laugh uproariously; if I believe that same content under the character *my pants are on fire*, I will likely look for a pool of water to jump into.)

Relativized Propositions

Nor will it do to introduce *relativized propositions*. The idea here is that whereas an *absolute* proposition is true or false absolutely, a relativized proposition is only true or false *at an index* (i.e., for a person, at a time, etc.). So in place of the absolute proposition *that John Perry is making a mess*, we would have the relativized proposition *that I am making a mess*, which is true at the index John Perry (among a few other messy shoppers, perhaps).

But this does not succeed in putting the indexicality into the belief. Anyone who notices John Perry making a mess will believe this relativized proposition to be true of John Perry. For that just involves taking John Perry to be the "I" of "I am making a mess." As Perry writes (p. 372, bottom left):

> "You now believe that *that I am making a mess* was true for me, then, but you certainly don't believe it is true for you now, unless you are reading this in a supermarket."

So believing that a relativized proposition *that I am making a mess* is true of someone doesn't make it a *first-person* belief, a self-ascription. One would also have to believe **oneself** to be the person it's true of, and that reintroduces the indexical component we were trying to explain away.

Beliefs vs. belief states

The crucial thing about essentially indexical beliefs, according to Perry, is the role they play in explaining behavior and making predictions (p. 374 top right). When Perry came to acquire the belief that he expressed by saying *I am making a mess*, he was in a certain **belief state**. And anyone who was in Perry's situation would have been in the same belief state—believing **of himself** that he was making a mess.

The belief state is thus not the **proposition believed**. In Perry's case, the proposition believed was *that John Perry is making a mess*; in my case, it would have been the proposition *that Marc Cohen is making a mess*—a different proposition. But we were in the same belief state.

The proposition believed is the **content** of one's belief. The **belief state**, on the other hand, is the **character** of one's belief. The belief state is the **sentence accepted**, rather than the proposition believed. It is the belief state (character), rather than the belief (content) that explains behavior.

Perry's point is that the character, or belief state, that we need to explain behavior may be inherently indexical, and so cannot be analyzed away in terms of either *de re* or *de dicto* belief ascriptions. Hence such explanations cannot be given simply in terms of **what** we believe, but must include **how** we believe it.

Indeed, he sketches a possible view (p. 375) on which "*de dicto* belief, already demoted from its central place in the philosophy of belief, might be seen as merely an illusion, engendered by the implicit nature of much indexicality." [This line has been explored by David Lewis ("Belief *de dicto* and *de se*") and Roderick Chisholm (*The First Person*).]

The central idea seems to have been established, though—indexicality is ineliminable, and hence the Fregean doctrine of propositions is fatally flawed.

Two Kinds of Meaning: Review

Meaning

Character	**Content**
Property of sentence-types	Property of sentence-tokens
Perry's belief state (sentence-accepted)	Perry's belief (proposition believed)
Fixed by convention for the use of an expression	Tied to conditions of truth and falsity