

Preserving a Propositional Account of De Se Belief

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1. Introduction

In the following squib, I present a solution to a puzzle about essential indexicality that preserves the view that the objects of belief are propositional. I begin by stating a set of assumptions under which I will be operating.

2. Assumptions

A1. Belief is a binary relation between an entity, the believer, and a proposition, the object of the belief. Beliefs, like all intentional attitudes, create opaque contexts.

A2. A proposition is the meaning expressed when a speaker sincerely utters a sentence.

A3. Propositions are the bearers of truth-values; a proposition is true or false solely on the basis of what obtains in a world. As such, propositions might be thought of as functions from worlds to truth-values.

A4. Proper names are directly referential. If $\phi(N)$ is a sentence containing at least one instance of the name N expressing the proposition P , then if $N = K$, the sentence $\phi(N/K)$ —the sentence obtained by substituting every instance of N in ϕ with K —also expresses P .

A4.1. Names rigidly designate their referents; if the use of name N at world w picks out an entity e at w , then the use of N at w picks out the entity named by N at every world w_n where that object exists (regardless of that entity's name at w_n).

A5. Definite descriptions are indirectly referential; they pick out different entities in different worlds. I characterize definite descriptions logically as “ ιxFx ” which can be translated as “the unique F ”. A definite description can be said to denote a function from worlds to individuals; “the unique F ” picks out an entity in just those worlds in which there is one and only one entity bearing the property F , or else it picks out nothing.

A6. Indexicals denote functions from contexts to individuals, including times and places

3. The Puzzle¹:

Suppose that John is grocery shopping. The bag of sugar he has placed into his shopping cart is torn, and a slow trickle of sugar is spilling from the bag onto the grocery store floor. Suppose further that John, while back-tracking through an aisle of the store, notices a small trail of sugar on the ground. He does not know that it is his bag that is ripped. Since John is somewhat of a good Samaritan, he decides to follow the trail of sugar to find the person spilling it, and let that person know of the problem. As he turns his cart to pursue the culprit, John utters sentence 1.

¹ The example is taken, and perhaps slightly modified, from John Perry's *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and other Essays*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

1. The person spilling the sugar is making a mess.

If we were to characterize John's belief state in uttering 1, the likely choice, given the above assumptions, is sentence 2.

2. John believes that the person spilling the sugar is making a mess.

In light of this belief, John speeds through the store, thinking the culprit is just around the next corner. After his third pass through the same aisle, John stops. He looks behind him, and notices that the trail is slightly thicker than the one he sees when he looks forward. All of a sudden, John has a realization, and utters sentence 3.

3. I am making a mess.

The question, then, is what could be the propositional content of his new belief? Is it even correct to say that the set of propositions to which John stands in the "believes" relation has changed? In other words, we can tell that John has *realized* something—that he has formed a new belief—because his behavior has changed. He no longer pursues the culprit because John now knows that he *is* the culprit. But it seems that in trying to find the *proposition* that is the object of John's new belief, we are hard pressed to find one.

Sentence 3 expresses a different proposition in the mouth of anyone who might utter it. The semantic value of "I" is determined by the context, so as it stands, 3 does not express a singular proposition. We cannot, however, express the object of belief as what seems to be the most likely candidate, sentence 4.

4. John is making a mess.

This is so because John need not know he is John in order to believe that he (himself) is the person making the mess. Hence, in every world just like the one represented in the above story, except that John does not know that he is, in fact, John, 4 could not possibly be the sentence representing the propositional content of John's new belief. Further, given that in any world where the above state of affairs obtains, John is the person spilling the sugar. Since the person spilling the sugar is the person making the mess, then *ipso facto* John is the person making the mess. However, previous to forming the new belief, John already believes the proposition expressed by sentence 1. What he doesn't know is that *he* is the person making a mess, and this is precisely the problematic proposition that we are intending to characterize as the object of John's new belief.

4. Solutions:

Perry thinks this problem shows that the difference in belief (and hence the change in behavior) can be explained in terms of how an already-held belief is had. On Perry's view, there is no difference in what John believes—the content, or conditions under which the belief is true—prior to and following the realization. Rather, what has changed is the way in which a particular belief is had. Hence, when John comes to think of the person spilling the sugar as *himself*, he comes to have a de re belief about the person spilling the sugar. Namely, John comes to entertain his belief about the person spilling the sugar under a different guise, to the effect that it is his res; picturing now that his belief about the person spilling the sugar is a belief about himself.

Lewis, and at times Quine, holds that what happens when one forms a de se belief is that one ascribes to oneself a property.² In the case above, John, when he fully realizes the situation, he ascribes to himself the property of believing that he is the person spilling the sugar. Thus, like Perry, Lewis thinks that nothing significantly changed in the propositional content of John's belief set.³

I agree with Perry that some kinds of indexical beliefs are irreducible, but I think that they can still be rendered propositionally. The way this would work is to deny first, that the proposition John has as the object of belief when he utters 3 is some bit of propositional knowledge he already possesses. John does come to believe something new. He comes to believe that he himself is the person spilling the sugar, and thus, also believes he himself is making a mess. Lewis characterizes the change in terms of properties: one realizes one's world has a particular property, and so one, realizing his inhabitation in that world, ascribes that property to himself. I don't think that this view on property ascriptions is far off the mark. However, contra Perry and Lewis, I think that we can track this change in attitude propositionally, and preserve all the above assumptions.

First, we must assume that there is a self-ascription predicate. Self-ascription is a complex, multi-leveled relation between individuals and properties. For example:
 $A(a, \lambda x.Tx)$, where " $\lambda x.Tx$ " can be translated as "being an x such that x has a tattoo" translates as "a ascribes to himself, the property of having a tattoo". Now consider the following property:
 $\lambda x.K[x,x^*]$. I call this the property of knowing oneself: translated perhaps as being an x such that x knows himself. The x can be any object, and the x^* might get translated as "he (himself)", or "his self" [not to be confused with "himself"]. Thus, one can know that $x = x$, even *be* that x , but still not have the property of knowing who he is (that is, knowing his self).⁴

If the property one ascribes to oneself is a belief about one's self, then there must be some kind of operator-notational way to render this proposition such that it will be new and distinct from the other beliefs one already had previous to self-ascribing this new property.

I propose the following analysis. We can represent the change that happens when John moves from having a belief about himself, to having a belief about his self*. The change occurs when John ascribes to himself the property of believing that he himself is the person spilling the sugar. Another way to describe what happens when John comes to have a new belief is that John discovered that a particular res, in this case his, has as a guise, the definite description "the person spilling the sugar."⁵ The proposition he comes to believe, then, is

5. It is true of John, that he* is the person spilling the sugar.

The difference in the salient

² Quine eventually rejects this view in favor of a view involving different more complex belief predicates. I think that "believes" should receive a uniform analysis. See Quine 1956.

³ Actually, Lewis doesn't think there is need for the propositional account of belief content at all. While Lewis admits that such an account will work to represent the objects of some beliefs, he does not think that it will work for cases of essential indexicality. He does, however think that taking properties to be the objects of beliefs will work for the analysis of any belief statement. See Lewis, 1979.

⁴ I follow Castaneda in using the "*" to represent the self as a primitive. As a matter of relevance here, I wish to remain ontologically neutral about the nature of selfhood.

⁵ This preserves Perry's intuition, though he would not say that a new proposition is present in John's beliefs.

propositions in his belief set prior to his realization and the one he believes after can be easily seen if we formulate the propositions logically. Let the following be my lexicon:

J = John

[BJ] = "John believes that" ['that' is optionally pronounced but key to the grammar I believe]

ιxSx = the person spilling the sugar

M[α] = α is making a mess

(τ/v) = a scoped term, used to bind the variable in a de re proposition. Translates "it is true of τ that..." The schema for such propositions is: (τ/v)[...v...]

* = an operator that takes an entity x as argument and delivers x's selfhood (whatever that might be). The result looks like this "x*" and can be translated as "x's self", or "he himself".

Sentence 1 in the logic (the propositional representation) is

1'. M[ιxSx]

Sentence 2 gets propositionally represented as

2'. [BJ] M[ιxSx]

Further, when John utters sentence 3, the proposition he has as his belief content is not 1', or anything equivalent given the assumed world constraints, but rather, it is 5, which translates into the logic as

5'. (J/y)[y* = ιxSx]

Finally, that John believes the proposition 5' can be seen in 6. 6' represents the proposition expressed by 6.

6. John believes that it is true of John, that he himself* is the person spilling the sugar.

6'. [BJ] (J/y)[y* = ιxSx]

Since it is clear that the proposition expressed by 5' is distinct from other beliefs in John's belief set prior to his realization, the assumption that propositions are the objects of beliefs need not be thrown out. A solution to the puzzle has been put forth that works along side and analogous to the property ascriptions account offered by Lewis, thus providing an alternative analysis for those who believe that a unified account of belief content can be found in the classic propositional account.

References:

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