

### *Temporal indexicals are essential*

Abstract: Are non-indexical action rationalizations necessarily incomplete, because of a missing indexical component? Bermúdez ('Yes, indexicals really are essential', *Analysis* 2017) argues that they are. Two things make the argument unpersuasive. First, it assumes that all action rationalizations involve attitudes that are *about the agent*. Second, it assumes that the attitudes expressible using 'I' are themselves *indexical*. Each is an assumption that believers in complete but non-indexical action rationalizations can and do reject. Surprisingly though, a more effective argument can be obtained by switching focus from indexical attitudes about *agents* to indexical attitudes about *times*. The debate about the *de se* and the *de nunc* have much less in common than is standardly assumed. It is the *de nunc* not the *de se* which provides the knock-down case for essential indexicality.

It is typically assumed that the issues raised by *de se* thought – about an agent – and *de nunc* thought – about a time – are parallel. Moreover, the *de se* is the case typically discussed in detail, with the possibility of an extension to the *de nunc* being taken as read. In this paper, I argue that this is a mistake, and I show how the mistake has had a distorting effect in particular on the debate about whether indexical attitudes are essential for the rationalization of intentional action. Whether the *de se* is thus essential is, I claim, an open question. That the *de nunc* is essential is much clearer. If we want to know whether *any* species of indexical attitudes is essential, the *de nunc* case is already conclusive.

Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever have challenged fans of the view that indexical attitudes are essential for the rationalization of intentional action to offer an argument for the following claim:

Impersonal action rationalizations are necessarily incomplete because of a missing indexical component (IIC) (2013: 37).

An action rationalization is ‘impersonal’ if it doesn’t involve an *indexical* component that refers to the *agent* of the action, i.e. if it isn’t *de se*.

José Luis Bermúdez takes up Cappelen and Dever’s challenge.<sup>1</sup> He breaks his task up into two. First, he argues that impersonal action rationalizations are incomplete (IICa). Second, he argues that, if they are, the only reason they can be is that they are missing an indexical component (IICb). (IICb) seems clearly correct to me. My focus in the critical part of the paper is therefore on Bermúdez’s argument for (IICa):

*Premise 1*

No action rationalization can correctly reconstruct an agent’s practical reasoning if it is possible for some agent to hold every propositional attitude in the set and not perform the action.

*Premise 2*

Even if an agent holds every propositional attitude in an impersonal action rationalization, she will not perform the consequent action if she believes that she is not the person referred to in the action rationalization.

*Premise 3*

For any impersonal action realization it is possible for an agent to hold every propositional attitude in the set and nonetheless believe that she herself is not the person referred to in those attitudes.

*Conclusion:*

---

<sup>1</sup> See Bermúdez 2017 (this journal). The same argument is also offered in chapter one of Bermúdez 2016.

Impersonal action rationalizations are incomplete (IICa). (2017: 692)

This argument is valid. But it will be unpersuasive to skeptics about (IIC), and neutrals should be wary about it too. Skeptics about (IIC) are skeptical about (IIC) because they accept views that entail that *Premise 2* and *Premise 3* are false. In (§1), I set out a view on which *Premise 2* is false. In (§2), I set out a view on which *Premise 3* is false. These two views are themselves contentious. But they do seem to be live options and they are what motivate those who are skeptical about (IIC). Accordingly, the real work, in providing a response to skeptics about (IIC), lies with showing that these views aren't live-options after all, which Bermúdez fails to do.

That is the critical part of the paper. The constructive part (§3) gives a more effective argument for essential indexicality, parallel to Bermúdez's, that focuses on the *time* of action, not the *agent*. It turns out that the parallel argument cannot be resisted in the way that the original argument can. My conclusion is that the *de nunc* provides a knock down case for essential indexicality, even if the *de se* does not.

*§1: The view that some action just involves worldly desires*

I repeat *Premise 2* from above:

Even if an agent holds every propositional attitude in an impersonal action rationalization, she will not perform the consequent action if she believes that she is not the person referred to in the action rationalization.

Bermúdez motivates this premise by noting what it implies about one of Cappelen and Dever's examples, which he calls 'Impersonal Action Rationalization'. In 'Impersonal Action Rationalization', the agent of the action is François, and the rationalization is as follows:

- **Belief:** François is about to be shot.
- **Desire:** François not be shot.
- **Belief:** If François ducks under the table, François will not be shot.
- **Action:** François ducks under the table. (2013:36)

Bermúdez comments:

What it [Premise 2] says is that an agent will not perform an action if she believes that she is not the person referred to by the attitudes in the action rationalization. So, in Impersonal Action Rationalization, Premise 2 says that the agent will not duck under the table if she believes that she is not François. This seems hard to dispute. (2017: 692).

I agree with Bermúdez that the implication *Premise 2* has in the particular case – that François had better not *disbelieve* 'I am François' – is correct. It doesn't follow that *Premise 2* itself is correct. *Premise 2* says that the agent had better not disbelieve that *she* is the person referred to in the action rationalization. This seems right for action rationalizations, like this one, in which the agent *is* referred to. It seems wrong for action rationalizations in which the agent is *not* referred to, if there are any of those.

Are there? Well, Cappelen and Dever clearly think so. The *other* example of an action rationalization they discuss is the following, in which the agent is Herman:

- **Belief:** Nora is in danger.
- **Desire:** Nora not be hurt
- **Belief:** If the door is closed Nora, will be safe.
- **Action:** Herman closes the door. (2013:36)

As applied in this case, *Premise 2* implies that Herman, the agent, had better not disbelieve ‘I am Nora’. In fact though, it is good, not bad, if Herman disbelieves ‘I am Nora’, since Herman is not Nora.

A defender of *Premise 2* might say that the action-rationalization as stated is incomplete because it is one line short – Herman’s desire that Nora not be hurt is only going to lead Herman to close the door if it leads him to form the desire that *he* close the door. That second desire *would* be about himself, and it *would* be an issue if Herman believed otherwise.

But a skeptic about (IIC) will ask: *why* must Herman form this desire? Unless one is very egotistical, or very unambitious, the range of desires one has will include *worldly* desires – desires for ends that do not constitutively involve oneself (e.g. the end that consists in some person, distinct from oneself, being safe). Herman’s having the worldly desire about Nora’s safety *might* lead him to form the self-directed desire about *his* closing the door. But why *must* it? Sometimes means are selected subpersonally. As is very familiar, one can make a fist *by* twitching the muscles of one’s arms without having formed a

desire that one twitch the muscles of one's arms. One might claim that there are limits on how far this can go, and in particular that the only desires that one can act on directly are desires that *one* do a certain thing – e.g. the desire 'I make a fist' or 'I close the door', but not the desire 'Nora be safe' or even 'The door be closed' or 'Those shoe-laces be tied'. But, in the absence of engagement with the philosophical and empirical literature on the question on what kinds of action can be basic (which Bermúdez, in common with other advocates of (IIC), has failed to go in for), we have no reason to accept this strong restriction. So denying *Premise 2* remains a live option.

In giving this argument, I have just focused on desire. Perhaps, though, desires always have their impact on intentional action by leading the agent to form a separate state of *intention*.<sup>2</sup> If so, would that change things?

I think it wouldn't. Just as we say things like 'Herman wants those shoe laces to be tied', we say things 'Herman intends those shoelaces to be tied'. Such attributions are surely sometimes true. Taken at face value, their truth requires worldly intentions. So, even an action rationalization that involves an intention could just involve worldly states.

Admittedly, some have claimed that a sentence like 'Herman intends those laces be tied' is really elliptical for 'Herman intends that *he* see to it that those laces be tied'. But, first, some motivation needs to be given for thinking this – why shouldn't we just take such attributions at face value?<sup>3</sup> Second, in many cases of apparent attributions of worldly

---

<sup>2</sup> See Bratman (1999).

<sup>3</sup> For an attempt to motivate the elliptical view, see Babb (2016). For criticism, see Morgan (2018). For an overview of the debate, and an argument that there can be worldly intentions, see Ferrero (2013).

intentions, not taking the attribution at face value is much harder than in the case just mentioned. Suppose I intend that the birds in the garden have enough food, while also hoping that there are worms in the ground for the birds and that I won't have to do anything (e.g. spread birdseed) myself. It certainly doesn't sound right, if things turn out as I hope and I do nothing, to say that I *saw* to it that the birds have enough food. But my intention that the birds have enough food is satisfied. So it seems that my intention that the birds have enough food can't be an intention that I *see to it* that the birds have enough food.

The main point here though is just that there is an ongoing debate about whether worldly intentions are possible. Insisting that desires only cause actions by way of intention forces someone who wants to deny *Premise 2* to pick a side in that debate. But, with that side picked, denying *Premise 2* remains a live option.

§2 *The view that **all** attitudes are impersonal.*

The other, independent problem with Bermúdez's argument is *Premise 3*, which a skeptic about (IIC) will likely reject. *Premise 3* is as follows:

For any impersonal action rationalization it is possible for an agent to hold every propositional attitude in the set and nonetheless believe that she herself is not the person referred to in those attitudes.

This premise seems plausible if we assume that there are *some* action rationalizations that are *not* impersonal – in that they *do* involve attitudes that pick out the agent in an indexical way – and, in particular, if we assume that attitudes ascribed by sentences containing ‘she herself’, and expressed using ‘I’, pick out the agent in an indexical way. Suppose otherwise. Suppose Francois’s desire that *she herself* duck under the table is *not* an indexical desire and that Francois ducked because of having that desire. In that case, the *impersonal* action rationalization that just consists in that desire will be a counterexample to *Premise 3*. Francois isn’t going to believe that *she herself* is not the person referred to in her desire that *she herself* duck under the table.

Francois’s desire that *she herself* duck under a table is, of course, an excellent candidate for being an indexical attitude, *if there are any of those*. But a major reason for skepticism about (IIC) is skepticism about that antecedent. Ruth Millikan argues that each of us has an inner name for herself that is ‘active’ in the sense that it is involved in attitudes that lead directly to the performance of actions.<sup>4</sup> Attitudes of Millikan’s involving her active self-name – ‘@RM’ – are expressed in language by Millikan using ‘I’. But, the view is, they aren’t themselves indexical.

Someone with this view will have to say what it means to say that an attitude is indexical, given that it can’t just mean being expressible using an indexical *word*. But they can do that. Tokens of indexical words pick out their referents *because* those words stand in certain relations to the referents (e.g. being tokened by, being tokened at the same time as). Analogously, indexical attitudes would be attitudes that are about their objects *because* those objects stand in certain relations to the objects. On Millikan’s picture, it isn’t the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Millikan (1990: 730).

case that her '@RM'-attitudes are about her *because* she is the one who tokens them. That is why they aren't indexical.

If '@RM' doesn't refer to Ruth because Ruth is the one tokening it, we will naturally want some other account of how it gets its reference. Millikan herself offers a teleosemantic account.<sup>5</sup> But her denial that '@RM' is an indexical, which is what is doing the work in undermining *Premise 3*, does not imply commitment to that account. Another possibility consistent with '@RM' not being an indexical is that there is no very informative story about why '@RM' has the reference it has – the referential fact that '@RM' refers to Ruth might supervene on the non-referential facts, but in an in principle hard to summarize way.

Summary: There is undoubtedly work to do for someone who wants to defend the most plausible version of a picture on which '@RM' is not an indexical. But there is no convincing argument, offered by Bermúdez or anyone else, that no version of that picture will pan out. It's a live possibility that *Premise 3* is false.

### §3 *Why temporal indexicals are essential even if personal indexicals are not*

I repeat from (IIC) from above:

Impersonal action rationalizations are necessarily incomplete because of a missing indexical component (IIC) (2013: 37).

---

<sup>5</sup> See Millikan (1989).

Bermúdez’s argument is an attempt to meet a challenge issued by Cappelen and Dever to defend (IIC). I’ve argued that Bermúdez’s argument for (IIC) is unsuccessful. In the remainder of the paper, I argue that a parallel argument to Bermúdez’s can show that indexical components are essential for action rationalizations. The difference between the two arguments is a switch in focus from the *de se* to the *de nunc*.

Suppose this works out. Does it constitute a reply to Cappelen and Dever? Well, it wouldn’t if their aim was simply to block the case for (IIC), since the parallel argument is not an argument for (IIC). However, blocking the case for (IIC) was never an end in itself for Cappelen and Dever. An early subsection of their book is titled: ‘1.2. Our Target: The Almost Universally Accepted View that Indexicality Is Philosophically Deep’ (2013:2). The first sentence of their chapter on agency is: ‘This chapter argues that there are no interesting or distinctive explanatory connections between indexicality and agency’ (2013: 31). (IIC), if it were true, would count as an interesting connection between indexicality and agency of exactly the sort the chapter argues there are none. That is why Cappelen and Dever are committed to denying it. A claim that is exactly like (IIC), except that the species of indexicality has been switched – e.g. from the *de se* to the *de nunc* – would, if true, count as an equally interesting connection between indexicality and agency. So Cappelen and Dever are equally committed to denying such a claim.

The claim about the *de nunc* that is exactly parallel to (IIC) is the following:

Atemporal action rationalizations are necessarily incomplete because of a missing indexical component. (Atemporal Incompleteness Claim – AIC)

An action rationalization is ‘atemporal’, in the sense intended here, iff it doesn’t involve an *indexical* component that refers to the *time* of action, i.e. if it isn’t *de nunc*.

Here is my argument for (AIC), parallel to Bermúdez’s argument for (IIC):

*Premise 1*

No action rationalization can correctly reconstruct an agent’s practical reasoning if it is possible for some agent to hold every propositional attitude in the set and not perform the action.

*Premise 2\**

Even if an agent holds every propositional attitude in an *atemporal* action rationalization, she will not perform the consequent action if she believes that *now* is not the *time* referred to in the action rationalization.

*Premise 3\**

For any *atemporal* action realization it is possible for an agent to hold every propositional attitude in the set and nonetheless believe that *now* is not the time referred to in those attitudes.

*Conclusion:*

Atemporal action rationalizations are incomplete (AICa).

On the plausible assumption that the only reason atemporal rationalizations are incomplete, if they are, is the absence of a temporal component, this argument for

(AICa) is also an argument for (AIC). The *difference* between my argument for (AIC) and Bermúdez’s argument for (IIC) lies in how much can be said in favor of the two key premises. I discuss *Premise 3\** first – (i) – and then *Premise 2\** – (ii).

(i) *Premise 3\* vs Premise 3: Why ‘now’ has to express a mental indexical even if ‘I’ doesn’t.*

Why can’t a skeptic about (AIC) simply extend Millikan’s ‘no indexicality in thought’ strategy from ‘I’ to ‘now’, and deny that the beliefs we express using ‘now’ are indexical?

‘@RM’, which Millikan’s uses of ‘I’ express, is not shareable (it exists in *Millikan’s* language of thought) but it is repeatable – it can be tokened at different *times*. Its being repeatable is arguably presupposed by other aspects of its nature. For example, it is a mental word, and one might think that words as such just are repeatable. More importantly, ‘@RM’ is supposed to be *active* and the relevant notion of *activity* seems to presuppose repeatability – what makes ‘@RM’ active is that Millikan is *stably disposed* so that if sentences like ‘@RM runs’ appear in her desire-box, then that causes Millikan’s body to move.

Suppose ‘now’ likewise expresses a single *repeatable* mental entity. If it does, then the entity appears to be a temporal indexical. If ‘now’, as used at 3pm, expresses a mental entity, then that entity, as tokened at 3pm, had better refer to 3pm. If ‘now’, as used at 8pm, expresses the same mental entity, then that entity, as tokened at 8pm, had better refer to 8pm. But then ‘now’ expresses a single mental entity that picks out a given moment *because* that is the moment at which it is being tokened. That is, it expresses a temporal indexical.

The other possibility is that ‘now’ expresses a series of unrepeatably mental entities (‘@3pm’, ‘@8pm’ etc). These can’t be names, since names are repeatable. But they also can’t be active, in Millikan’s sense, since being active is a matter of how an agent is *stably* disposed to act. Most seriously, it is utterly mysterious how each of them gets to refer to the one and only moment at which it is tokened. It can’t be *because* it is tokened at that moment. That would make it a temporal indexical.

Conclusion: ‘now’ expresses indexical attitudes even if ‘I’ does not. *Premise 3\** must be accepted.

(ii) *Premise 2 vs Premise 2\*: Why appealing to the temporal analogue of worldly desire doesn’t help.*

The intuition behind *Premise 2* was that if, for example, Francois desires that Francois duck but she disbelieves ‘I am Francois’, she won’t duck. The parallel thought behind *Premise 2\** might be that if I desire to go to a particular meeting at 3pm but disbelieve ‘3pm is now’, I won’t go to the meeting. The worry about *Premise 2* was that the point might not generalize. In particular, it doesn’t seem to apply to cases in which an agent acts just on the basis of a worldly desire (for simplicity, I ignore worldly intentions). The parallel worry about *Premise 2\** would be that the point does not apply to cases in which an agent acts just on the basis of the temporal analogue of a worldly desire.

What is the temporal analogue of a worldly desire? I could have a desire, at 3pm, to go to a meeting *at 4pm*. That is about *a* time, although not the time at which I have the desire (similarly, Herman’s worldly desire that Nora be safe is about *an* agent, although not the agent whose desire it is). But having a desire, at 3pm, to go to a meeting at 4pm is no more likely to make me go to a meeting at 3pm than having a desire, at 3pm, to go to a

meeting at 3pm. So appealing to this kind of analogue of a worldly desire is not helpful to the skeptic about (AIC).

What about *thoroughly* atemporal desires? I could have a desire, at 3pm, to go to a meeting *tout court* – a desire to go to a meeting *at any old time*. Such desires are a rather marginal category to build a case against (AIC) around. An agent who only ever acted on them wouldn't do well. For almost all of the things it would be good to do at some times, there will be other times at which it would be bad to do those things. Also, agents are finite. This imposes an upper limit on how relaxed about time we can afford to be.

Suppose though that I do have the desire to go a meeting *at any old time*. *When* it is satisfied is a matter of indifference. But, of course, if I am *ever* to satisfy it, there must be some *particular* time at which I do so. Could my sub-personal systems select this time for me? It's hard to see how that would work. Closing a door that is right in front of me generally requires the same kind of movements on the different occasions on which I do it. One can see how a desire to move my arms in a certain way might eventually cede place to a worldly desire *that the door be closed* that engages subpersonal mechanisms that select appropriate movements without giving rise to a further desire directed at *my* performing those movements. Our subpersonal systems might learn that *moving thusly* is a way of closing a door. But, again, that presupposes repeatability. How are my subpersonal mechanisms supposed to learn that moving meeting-wards *at 3pm* (on 24/08/2017, say) is a way of *going to a meeting at some time or other*? And how are they to have their effect on my body, without issuing, at 3pm, some kind of motor instruction involving 'now'?

Conclusion: *Premise 2\** should be accepted, even if *Premise 2* is not.

### *Conclusion*

The *de se* and the *de nunc* exhibit some striking parallels. That makes it easy to miss the differences. But we shouldn't be surprised if there are some. Even if *sense* has some relevance to action rationalization, that doesn't mean *reference* has none. And, at the level of reference, *de se* attitudes and *de nunc* attitudes are categorically different – Ruth Millikan and 3pm have little in common. There are more specific differences to point to. Intuitively, the *source* of the need for *de nunc* attitudes in action has something to do with the fact that agents exist over time and have to choose one particular time at which to perform a given act, from all the different times at which they could perform it. If the source of the (claimed) need for *de se* attitudes were the same it would have something to do with the fact that agents exist 'over agents' and have to choose, from the all different agents through which they might act, just one agent through which to act. That doesn't sound right. The kind of thing that chooses, an agent, spans times, but does not span agents. At a minimum, the upshot is that defenders of the idea that indexical attitudes are essential should not take their lead, in deciding on what species of indexical attitude to focus on, from skeptics about essential indexicality. The skeptics might be right on the case they discuss but wrong on the broader point. I've argued that (IIC) might not be right, but (AIC) certainly is right. One won't do *anything* intentional at 3pm unless one desires, at 3pm, to do something *then*. So, action essentially involves indexicality, whether or not it involves *de se* indexicality.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> For discussion and comments, thanks to Manuel García-Carpintero, Johan Gustafsson, Michele Palmira, Léa Salje, Carlota Serrahima and two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

*Bibliography*

- Babb, M (2016) 'The Essential Indexicality of Intentional Action' *The Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol 66 no 264 439-457.
- Bermúdez, José Luis (2017) 'Yes, indexicals really are essential' *Analysis* 77 (4): 690-694.
- Bermúdez, José Luis (2016) *Understanding T: Language and Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bratman, M. E. (1999) *Faces of Intention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cappelen, H and Dever, J (2013) *The Inessential Indexical: on the Philosophical Insignificance of Perspective and the First Person*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ferrero, L. (2013). Can I Only Intend My Own Actions? Intentions and the Own Action Condition. In D. Shoemaker, *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility, Volume 1* (pp. 70-94). Oxford: OUP.
- Millikan, R (1990). 'The Myth of the Essential Indexical', in *Noûs* 24 (5): 723-734.
- Millikan, R (1989). 'Biosemantics' in *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (July): 281-97.
- Morgan, D (2018). 'Impersonal Intentions'. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Volume 68, Issue 271 (April) 376–384.