

‘About Time’ conference abstracts June 2019, University of Leeds

Ali Boyle (Cambridge)

‘Discovering the Past’

It’s often said that individuals lacking episodic memory are ‘stuck in time’. That might simply be to say that they lack the capacity for mental time travel - imaginative projection into the past and future. If so, the claim is probably true, but not particularly interesting. A more interesting construal of the claim is that episodic memory is necessary for some aspects of temporal understanding. I distinguish various aspects of temporal understanding, and argue for two claims. First, episodic memory is not necessary for an understanding of the past as such - nor is it clear that it could furnish one with such understanding. Second, to the extent that episodic memory *is* constitutively involved in temporal understanding, it is in the same way involved in our understanding of space. So, we should rethink the centrality of time in our accounts of episodic memory.

Daniel Morgan (York)

‘*De se vs de nunc*’

How much do *de se* attitudes – attitudes whose canonical expression in English is the word ‘I’ – and *de nunc* attitudes – attitudes whose canonical expression in English is the word ‘now’, or the present tense – have in common? A lot, is the standard assumption: the *de se* and *de nunc* are taken to be two species of the same genus, the genus indexical, and the debates about the two species are taken to run in parallel. This assumption is common ground between ‘essential indexical boosters’ (e.g. Lewis, Perry, Castañeda) who hold that indexical attitudes are special and ‘essential indexical skeptics’ (e.g. Millikan, Cappelen and Dever and Magidor) who hold that indexical attitudes are not special. In this paper, I argue against the standard assumption. The *de se* and the *de nunc* work differently, in ways that flow from the metaphysical difference in the kind of things that agents – the referents of *de se* attitudes – are and the kind of thing that times – the referents of *de nunc* attitudes – are. Essential indexical skeptics might be right about the *de se*, but essential indexical boosters are right about the *de nunc*. More generally, the *de se* is a potentially distorting lens for an investigation of the *de nunc*. The *de nunc* merits its own investigation.

Julian Bacharach (UCL)

‘Tense and the first Person: Between appearance and reality’

Tensed and first-personal thought are philosophically puzzling because they seem to be both perspectival and indispensable. On the one hand, these modes of thought are expressed

through the use of indexical linguistic expressions, such as ‘I’, ‘now’, and inflections of verbal tense—expressions whose semantic role is a function from a context of use to a reference. This encourages an understanding of tensed and first-personal thought as ways of contextually picking out items in a domain of things that are there anyway, independently of being so picked out, in much the same way that spatial indexicals and demonstratives are used objectively to pick out places and things. But at the same time, there are powerful philosophical intuitions that something important would be missing from a description of the world that did not employ tense or the first person. In both cases, this combination of features is liable to give rise to metaphysical controversies about the relation between the perspective expressed by these modes of thought, and the reality on which it is a perspective.

The main claim of this paper is that these puzzles, and the underlying facts which give rise to them, are not merely analogous, but connected. Tense and the first person are dual aspects of a single phenomenon, namely temporal self-consciousness. The key idea is that our ability to think about time at all depends both on our contingent relations to the temporal world in acting and being affected by things in time; and on our self-conscious awareness of those contingencies. Appreciating this point enables us to recognise the ineliminable role of tensed and first-personal thought, but without thereby reifying tensed and first-personal facts as themselves autonomous and irreducible aspects of reality. This in turn gives us an enhanced menu of options in debates about the reality of tense and the first person, and promises a richer understanding of their puzzling metaphysical status: neither dispensable appearance, nor appearance-independent reality.

Komarine Romdenh-Romluc (Sheffield)

‘I’, ‘now’, action and experience’

The word ‘I’ and the thoughts we typically express with it have been a source of fascination to philosophers. ‘I’ seemingly behaves in some peculiar ways, which many writers take to reflect some interesting features of the thoughts it typically expresses. ‘Now’ is often categorised alongside ‘I’ (together with ‘here’): these words are indexicals, i.e., words that depend on the context to fix their reference. Moreover, they seem to behave in similarly peculiar ways, which suggests that the thoughts they typically express are similar to ‘I’-thoughts. However, whilst many writers have pointed out the analogies between ‘I’ on the one hand, and ‘now’ (along with ‘here’) on the other, ‘now’ has received scant attention in the literature. My aim in this paper is to explore the alleged parallel between ‘I’ and ‘now’. I will begin by setting out a particular picture of ‘I’-thoughts, focusing on two features ‘I’ shares with ‘now’. First, certain ‘I’-utterances appear to be immune to errors of misidentification; second, the thoughts typically expressed using ‘I’ seem to be essential for action. I will argue that these two features of ‘I’ are connected. Together, they tell in favour of a perceptual-demonstrative account, where the self-conception typically expressed by ‘I’ is formed on the basis of a special form of bodily awareness. This is one of the central ways of accounting for ‘I’-thought in the literature, although it is not uncontroversial. Having done this, I will examine

whether 'now'-thought can be understood on the same model. I will begin by presenting an account of our temporal experience drawn from writers in the phenomenological tradition, before arguing that it does not support an analogous perceptual-demonstrative account of 'now'. Instead, 'now'-thoughts are largely 'feature-placing' thoughts - they do not involve thinking about an individual time and then attributing some property or other to it, but simply registering the presence of an event. This means that the connection between 'now'-thoughts and action must also be different from the one that holds in the case of 'I'. I will draw on some ideas about action from the phenomenological tradition to explain this feature of thinking about 'now'.

Marie Guillot (Essex)

'Phenomenal concepts of self and time'

I want to make a case for the view that some of what are usually regarded as indexical concepts are really phenomenal concepts. In earlier work, I defended a more specific version of this claim for the particular case of the concept of self. However, this raises a number of objections, some having to do with the controversial nature of the self-experience a phenomenal concept of self would be anchored in. I think these objections can be answered; but because the debate on the subjective character of consciousness is unsettled, and the relevant empirical evidence is difficult to interpret, the answers will be unpersuasive to some. In this talk I try a different strategy. I look at the parallel claim that some temporal concepts are phenomenal concepts. I make a case for the temporal claim based on a conceptual point, and on an argument using clearer-cut experimental data on mental time-travel.

Matthew Soteriou (KCL)

Occupying and Imagining a Temporal Point of View

Many agree that it is possible for one to represent a spatial perspective that one does not occupy – for example, in imagination or memory. Some have tried to argue for the further claim that it is possible for it to seem to one as though one occupies a spatial perspective that one does not in fact occupy. Relatedly, some have sought to argue that substantive conditions need to be met if one is to secure the kind of occupancy of a spatial perspective that enables one to think of a place as 'here'. Sartre's view of dreams invites analogous questions and issues regarding temporal perspectives. Those questions and issues will be explored in this talk. Can one represent a temporal perspective that one does not occupy? Is it possible for it to seem to one as though one occupies a temporal perspective which one does not in fact occupy? If so, what does it take to occupy, and not merely represent, a temporal point of view? And in what ways might our answers to such questions be relevant to an account of what is required for thinking of a time as 'now'?

Robin Le Poidevin (Leeds)

'The Mind's Past: is there a conceptual problem of other times?'

It seems we can at least frame a temporal counterpart to the conceptual problem of other minds, in these terms: given the present-tensed perspective that is essential to having an experience, we don't possess a sufficiently general and unified concept of experience which would permit us to think of ourselves as having had experiences in the past. But is this a serious problem? Can we not simply appeal to episodic memory as an adequate source of the idea of past experiences? It is suggested that there is a problem here, but specifically for those who adopt a certain descriptive metaphysics (in PF Strawson's sense) of time, one in which the present is not viewed in purely perspectival terms.

Simon Prosser (St Andrews)

'A Perspective on Prior's 'Thank Goodness' Example'

Recent scepticism about the first-person perspective has tended to focus on the explanation of actions. While I remain convinced that a certain kind of egocentricity is indeed essential for action, it is less often noted that it is also essential for certain emotional responses. Why, in Arthur Prior's famous example, do we thank goodness that a traumatic event is over, but feel dread when it is still to come? An important part of the solution, I believe, lies in the evolutionary story given by James Maclaurin and Heather Dyke (2002). But that's not the whole story. There must be a difference between thinking that an event is past, and thinking that it is future, that makes it appropriate to have different emotional reactions to the event depending on which of those thoughts occurs. What we need is a kind of thought that can only be had when one stands in the right kind of relation to the event – a version of what Perry (1977) called a 'self-locating' thought. I shall explain how this works in the temporal case by appealing to an epistemic property that I call 'first-person redundancy'. In my view the first-person perspective is fundamental, but that's because I assume the stage theory of persons; someone who rejects the stage theory may reinterpret my account in terms of the *de nunc*.