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'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.