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‘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'.