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John Perry

Reference and Reflexivity.

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This short book pulls together a number of themes from previous essays (see especially *The Essential Indexical: Expanded Edition*, 2000). My strategy will be to present it without the detours, qualifications and reservations that make this such a rich, complex and rewarding book. In previous writings, Perry has both applied Kaplan's character-and-content theory to cognitive issues involving indexicals-demonstratives, and investigated the role of situations in meaning relations. In the present book, he says, 'I move the utterance to the center of things' (xi). Chapter 1 introduces the problems of content, context and cognitive significance for indexicals-demonstratives and proper names, Chapter 2 offers a general conception and taxonomy of propositions and content, Chapters 3-5 apply this conception to indexicals-demonstratives, Chapters 6-7 apply this conception to proper names, and Chapter 9 pulls the two strands together, and compares the result with (early) Frege and Kaplan.

Perry promotes and defends a position he alternatively labels 'critical referentialism', the 'reflexive referential' theory and the 'reflective referential' theory. The basic idea is that both the Russellian (referential) and Fregean (descriptive) traditions have something to offer, and their insights should be incorporated into a final theory. Unlike the traditions, Perry is careful to distinguish issues of meaning, which pertain to linguistic types in virtue of rules and conventions of language, from issues of content, which pertain to utterances (production or use of tokens) in contexts — which can

function presemantically to, e.g., disambiguate, semantically to fix reference or postsemantically to provide ‘unarticulated constituents’. The Russellian tradition contributes an analysis of ‘official content’ in terms of the referential contribution to what is said, as supported by well-known intuitions-arguments surrounding counterfactual truth conditions and samesaying. The Fregean tradition contributes the notion of an ‘identifying condition’ on reference, ‘a unary condition that only one thing satisfies’, as supported by well-known intuitions-arguments surrounding co-reference and no-reference. The major project of the book is to explore the integration of these traditions by supplementing the referential tradition (and so get counterfactual truth-conditions and what is said right) with other types of content in order to solve the co-reference and no-reference objections to referentialism. Perry acknowledges that, in the end, his view could also be viewed as a descriptive theory supplemented by aspects of the referential tradition.

According to Perry’s terminology, indexicals-demonstratives refer (contribute the object they designate to the proposition expressed), because they denote (the conventions of the language associate an identifying condition with them), whereas proper names, though they refer, do not denote, they name (the conventions of the language associate an object with them). Descriptions describe by denoting. Moreover, each of these devices is associated with a different kind of content: indexical (‘reflexive’) content, referential (‘official’) content, designational content and extension. To display the variety of contents, when associated with utterances of various devices (on occasions), Perry eschews Kaplan’s device of angled brackets, and opts instead for conventions of boldface and italics ‘the boldface tells us which things we’re thinking of as the subject matter. The italics tell us that [it] is the identifying conditions ... that are the subject matter, and not the objects they designate’ (26). For descriptions, which can be taken ‘referentially’ (boldface) or ‘attributively’ (italics), the convention is useful, but it is not clear what boldfacing a proper name adds, given the above conception of them as naming and referring. An example from Perry will flesh this out:

- (1) I am a computer scientist (said by David Israel)
- (2) David Israel is a computer scientist (said by someone referring to David Israel)

Although (1) and (2) have the same official content, viz the singular proposition:

(P) <David Israel, x is a computer scientist>

they have different ‘reflexive contents’, and this difference can play a role in explaining why (1) vs (2) was uttered, and how (1) vs (2) is understood.

Indexicals. The reference of ‘I’ depends on narrow context (agent, time, position) and is automatic (no further intention is required) vs e.g. ‘that’ which depends on wide context and is intentional. The reflexive content of an utterance of (1) is the proposition:

(Px1) that the speaker of (1) is a computer scientist (there is an x such that x is a speaker of (1) and x is a computer scientist)

Reflexive contents allow Perry to solve problems of cognitive significance for indexicals. According to Perry, there is a spectrum of ‘incremental’ contents (or even truth conditions) of which (P) and (Px1) are only two, depending on which facts about the utterance and context are fixed: language, words, meaning, context. Official content, (P), is maximally fixed incremental content, in this case, fixing David Israel as the speaker of (1).

Proper Names. The reflexive content of the particular utterance of (2) is the proposition:

(Px2) that the person named ‘David Israel’ to whom the use of it in (2) refers, is a computer scientist

What links name to individual, analogous to ‘being the speaker of (1)’ for indexicals? ‘When a person or thing is assigned a name, a permissive convention is established: that name may be used to designate that person’ (103). Perry doesn’t develop this idea very far, other than to note that some notion of ‘exploiting’ such conventions is needed to deal with ‘nambiguity’. So (Px2) becomes:

(Px2’) that the person the convention exploited by (2) permits one to designate with ‘David Israel’ is a computer scientist.

Here ‘the role of context is pre-semantic, to help figure out which convention is being exploited ... — to grasp the relevant convention — is just to grasp who is designated’ (109). Permissive conventions seem to be individuated by name and bearer, but we still do not know what one looks like, nor how exactly they are exploited.

Reflexive contents for names allow Perry to solve co-reference (and ‘Padrewski’) problems for names, but not no-reference problems, since there is nothing for naming conventions to attach to. For this Perry digs deeper into the cognitive support for such conventions: ‘A convention that governs the use of a name is a permissive convention that is supported by a notion-network; it permits one to use a name to refer to the origin of the notion-network. Where there is a block in the network, a name may be supported by a network with no origin, and so will be an empty name, when used exploiting the convention’ (148-9). Notions (mental representations of particulars) and ideas (mental representations of properties and relations) reside in notion-networks, and provide a new increment of ‘intentional content’. Perry offers (Chapter 7) an intriguing preview (more will come) of his mental management scheme involving the flow of information from and to perceptions, buffers, files, origins and utterances. The upshot is that utterances involving vacuous names, such as:

(3) Jacob Horn does not exist

have the reflexive content:

(Px3) that the network that supports the use of the name ‘Jacob Horn’ in (3) has no origin

Fixing the reference of the description to the notion associated with 'Jacob Horn' (NJH) yields the network content:

(P3) that NJH has no origin

Network content, as Perry urges, also has interesting applications to fiction.

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