

# Are There ‘Tensed’ Facts (A-Series)?

EDMUND RUNGALDIER, INNSBRUCK

In everyday life we presuppose that indexical thoughts *trigger* actions: the agent has to believe that *he himself* is in the right space-time position in order to act *hic et nunc*. Under the *reasons* for actions we thus subsume not only intentions, information and knowledge, but indexical beliefs as well. For accepting tensed indexical beliefs as reasons for actions and emotions we need an ontology with continuants/endurers. A mere four-dimensional event-ontology without *tensed facts* might be a good ontological framework for scientific, *impersonal* explanations, but for the *personal* explanations of actions based on indexical thoughts it will not suffice. I do, therefore, plead for tensed facts (A-series), even though not for spatial indexical facts: there are disanalogies between spatial and temporal indexicals.

## Indexical beliefs and ontology

What makes our indexical beliefs true if they are true? Are there besides the objective facts special indexical facts as their truth-makers? If it is true that it is now 3 p.m. what makes this true? Should we assume that it is made true by a tensed fact based on the property of “presentness” (A-series) or only by the objective fact that the time of this token of my belief coincides with the objective time 3 p.m. (*token-reflexive* account, B-series)?

Mellor argues that there cannot be mere indexical viz. personal truth conditions: “If there were, then since all sentence tokens of the form ‘I am X’ are true if and only if produced by X, every person would have to be both I and not I, which no one can be. Reality can no more contain a person (*I*) or a property (*being me*) satisfying such a condition than it can contain a time *now* or a property of *being now*”. (Mellor 1991, 19) The present is just a time among others, and confers no special status to the circumstances which occupy it. However, to assume that there are no indexical facts does not imply that there are no indexical truths.

If all indexical truths can be made true by objective facts—Mellor argues—we can have real subjective knowledge and true indexical statements in a single, wholly objective world. It doesn’t follow from the evidently

different contents of subjective and objective beliefs, that there are different kinds of properties, objective and subjective. There is just one world onto which both beliefs are directed.

This is a very plausible line of thought, but does it equally apply to tensed sentences and beliefs as to spatial sentences and beliefs—as Mellor assumes it? Is it really the case that the sole role tensed facts can play in our thinking coincides with the role of the objective temporal facts of being before, after or contemporaneous with the time of utterance (B-series)?

The notion of human agency as understood in everyday life and the notion of *reason* for a human action support the opposite view. The belief that something has happened in the past or will happen in the future provides us with reasons to act in a certain way, and to feel certain emotions. Think e.g. of a severe pain: Its role as reason for an action or a feeling depends on whether it is present, past or expected for the imminent future. In each case the reason is a different one.

Even if it is plausible to assume that there are no spatial indexical properties, it is not equally plausible that there are no tensed properties or that the truth conditions of tensed sentences can be stated in each case solely in terms of objective time (B-series). It is not at all obvious that a token of the belief “it is now 2005” has to be analysed in the same way as “here is Kirchberg”. Whether we tend towards the assumption of tensed facts in the sense of the A-theory or not depends, ultimately, on whether we understand ontology as mere theoretical discipline or as embracing both: theoretical and practical philosophy.

Today, ontology tends to be conceived as a branch of *theoretical* philosophy. In contemporary ontology one generally asks what the ultimate structures and elements of reality are. This seems to be a mere theoretical investigation, like positive science, i.e. objective and excluding indexicality and agent-causality. Since it strives for objectivity it has to exclude all personal approaches and to conform to “a point of view from nowhere”.

In the Aristotelian tradition, ontology had a slightly different status. It had to take into account the presuppositions of both theoretical *and* practical philosophy. The theoretical/practical distinction was well known to Aristotle, but he did not relegate ontology to the one realm of theoretical investigations. His pluri-categorial ontology with substances (continuants/endurers) acquiring and losing different properties is based on practical philosophy as well.

For the purpose of positive science, modern theoretical naturalistic ontol-

ogies seem to suffice. If, on the other hand, we take into consideration everyday talk about ourselves, especially about actions and emotions, i.e. if we do not exclude practical philosophy and agency, many arguments support the opposite view: we need richer ontologies. Practical reasoning is based on the *first-person* perspective, on an *ego-centric* approach: I have to decide what to do, I am confronted with the problem of what to do *hic et nunc*.

For accepting tensed indexical beliefs as reasons for actions we need an ontology with continuants/endurers. A mere four-dimensional event-ontology without *tensed facts* might be a good ontological framework for scientific, *impersonal* explanations, but for the *personal* explanations of agency based on indexical thoughts it will not suffice.

## Personal and impersonal accounts of action

According to the classical Aristotelian approach, actions are understood as *doings* by agents: agents *bring about* or *produce* effects; they are the source of what they do. In this sense a human agent is said to be the *causa* (cause in a special sense) of what she brings about. The causal relation is, thus, said to hold not only between events, but between an agent as a continuant/endurer, on the one hand, and an event/state of affairs or a series of events/states of affairs, on the other.

Nowadays the predominant approach to human agency is a *naturalistic* one, presupposing only event-causality. Contemporary naturalism is committed to the view that real entities can adequately be described solely in scientific terms and explained in terms of event-causality. Any entities that are taken to exist should bear a relevant similarity to entities that characterize the best physical theories. Thus, the only entities allowed are those that are accessible to scientific description and explanation.

The distinction between the classical approach to agency based on agent-causality and the one based on event-causality has its correspondence in the distinction between the personal and impersonal approach to human action: From the *personal* point of view an action is a person's doing something *for a reason*; her doing is intelligible when we know the reason that led her to it. Whereas from the *impersonal* point of view an action does not differ from events linked by causal relations: "An action would be a link in a causal chain that could be viewed without paying attention to people, the links being understood by reference to the world's causal workings." (Hornsby 1997, 283)

The Aristotelian conception of *an agent* is a conception of an individual with causal powers. A human action is the conscious and deliberate exercise of such powers. The naturalist argues that such a conception has to be substituted by a conception devoid of agents or explained away. From an impersonal and external point of view everything I do or anyone else does is part of a longer course of events that no one ‘does’, but that *happens*. Of course any naturalistic explanation of an action will refer to desires, intentions and beliefs as well. They are taken as *antecedentia* or antecedent-conditions of the explanandum. But the naturalistic approach separates them from the agent. The naturalistic impersonal approach equates reasons with causes. One of the most discussed attempts at such a project was Davidson’s anomalous monism.

In personal explanations, however, we *make sense* of what people do and do not do by referring to their beliefs and desires as *reasons* for their actions. The notion of action as used in everyday life presupposes the idea of intentionally acting people: *we bring about* what we do by acting on reasons.

In order to understand why people do what they do in certain circumstances at a particular time, we try to find out what their indexical beliefs are. In explaining action we do refer to intentions and beliefs of the agent. However, it makes a big difference whether the beliefs are third- or first-person beliefs, whether they are impersonal or indexical.

J. Perry introduces his account of *indexicals* by a personal example: He saw the mess in the shop and believed that a shopper with a torn sack was making that mess. At first he did not realize that he himself was the one. As soon as he discovered that he was making that mess he stopped following the trail around the corner and rearranged the torn sack in his own cart. (Perry 1993, 33) What explains the change in his behaviour? It is the change in his beliefs: an impersonal belief turned into a personal one: he realized that *he himself* was the one he thought about, and this triggered his action.

For triggering an action the objective reasons must be supplemented by indexical *identity beliefs* of the form “ $\delta = I$ ”, where “ $\delta$ ” stands for some definite description. The chairperson e.g. might know that the chairperson has to chair the meeting at noon on Friday in the meeting hall. This objective knowledge is however not sufficient to trigger the right action. In order to chair the meeting at the right place and time he has to know that *he himself* is the chairperson, that *this* is the right room, and that *this* is the right day and time.

On the one hand, we have knowledge which is free of subjective and indexical perspectives; on the other hand, we have thoughts which exploit the subjective point of view. Theoretical and positive sciences are free of indexical perspectives: there is no privileged point of view for them. There is, however, also knowledge permeated by indexicality, knowledge we operate with when we are actively engaged in the world. For the purpose of action this indexical thought viz. knowledge is indispensable. In order to act we need a direct cognitive awareness of ourselves *hic et nunc*.

## Agency based disanalogies between space and time

The concept of agency entails *disanalogies* between the manner in which an agent exists in space and time. There is a sense in which we as agents are prisoners of time but not of space: we are spatially but not temporally free. We can choose where to live but not in what period of time. For an agent time necessarily has a direction but not space. An agent understands her tensed beliefs as referring to tensed facts.

Gale has recently put forward new arguments for the thesis that *now* and *here* are *modally* disanalogous. He argues by forming pairs of sentences differing among them solely in their indexical expressions. In the one case they have spatial, in the other temporal indexicals: instead of containing e.g. "here" they contain "now" and instead of "later than" or "earlier than" "to the rear of" viz. "in front of" and vice versa. (Gale 2002, 70)

- An agent can *now* deliberate about and make choices and have intentions in respect to her conduct *later* but not *earlier* than now.
- An agent can *here* deliberate about and make choices and have intentions in respect to her conduct *in front* but not *to the rear* of here.

The "can" should be taken in the weak sense of mere conceptual possibility. Even if it might not be possible that I bring about things to the front and to the rear of here, it still is conceptually possible to do this and thus conceptually possible that I deliberate about it. However, it is impossible to make choices and have intentions in respect to one's own conduct in the past. Gale unfolds this intuition in detail and defends it against various objections.

Other disanalogies are based on the *axiological asymmetry* between the past and future of agents. This temporal asymmetry has no modally equiva-



lent spatial analogue. An agent's attitudes toward her past and future limitations are different. E.g., we regret that our existence does not extend beyond some time later than now but do not regret in the same way that our existence does not extend beyond some place to the rear of here.

Some have argued that we would be happier if we lacked the cited tensed bias. But such a passive, contemplative sort of human being would not be an agent: Agents prefer that their painful experiences be in the past and their pleasurable ones in the future. However, they do not have any analogous spatial preference. It doesn't matter whether their pains and pleasures occur in any particular direction from here.

Four-dimensionalists and 'de-tenseres' consider space and time on a par (B-series). They do not, thus, accept tensed facts. However, difficulties for them are not only due to disanalogies between space and time like the ones mentioned, but also to disanalogies stemming from our emotional attitudes.

## Tensed facts and emotions

In our life we offer 'the fact' that something *has* happened, is happening, or will happen as reason not only for what we do but also for what we feel: I hear that a loved one has died. I knew that he was going to die, yet I feel deep grief on hearing that he in fact *has* died. I cannot stand the thought that he is no longer alive. The problem for the four-dimensionalist (B-series) is to show how anything like our current emotional life might be consistent with the claim that 'past', 'present', and 'future' events all have the same kind of reality and so, in themselves, are all of the same significance. (Cockburn 1998, 84f.)

It seems that Spinoza took this idea seriously: "In so far as the mind conceives a thing under the dictates of reason, it is affected equally, whether the idea be of a thing future, past, or present". (Cited from Cockburn 1998, 78) The feelings about an event would not vary as it moves from the future, through the present, into the distant past. However, such views of the emotions conflict with central strands of our normal thinking about emotions. Emotions are—so we are convinced—not immune to the force of our indexical beliefs. Thus, we characterise emotions as appropriate or non-appropriate in view of given circumstances. For instance, relief is misplaced if we believe that there is worse to come.

Often we communicate about tensed events as reasons for feelings even if we do not know their objective dates: via indexicals we succeed in refer-

ring to the actual moment of time even if we do not know what time it is and what date we have. We do not need any objective time-references for that. In a sense, by using indexicals we even say more than by using their substitutes of the objective language of dates (B-series). Prior points out that it is impossible to say in a tenseless way what we mean when we say, 'Thank goodness that's over!' It certainly doesn't mean the same as, e.g., 'Thank goodness the date of the conclusion of that thing is Friday, June 15, 1954.' We would not understand why anyone should be thankful for that. (See Müller 2002, 197)

Prior's 'Thank goodness argument' is a strong argument in favour of a tensed understanding of time supposing tensed facts (A-series): My relief is not due to the fact that that thing takes place at a certain date, but that it is *over*. It is the *overness* or *pastness*—as Prior says—of the thing that I am thankful for, and nothing else. If I were not convinced that it is a fact that it is over I would not be relieved! The token-reflexive approach is not adequate for an account of the connection between my indexical tensed belief and my emotional relief.

The assumption that tensed indexical beliefs are made true by tensed facts gives an ontological grounding to an agent having emotional biases. "If the past-present-future perspective were to be non-objective, an agent's axiological biases in favour of the future would be merely subjective. There would be a serious and depressing bifurcation between agents and nature." (Gale 2002, 84)

## Conclusion

By explaining human actions and emotions we refer to temporal indexical beliefs whose truth conditions cannot be accounted for exclusively in terms of a four-dimensional eternalist ontology (B-series). They require that there are tensed indexical facts (A-series). If we reject tensed indexical facts and plead for a mere four-dimensional ontology we are forced to reduce all action explanations to impersonal explanations on the basis of mere event-causality. If all times are equally real the tense serves merely to indicate the temporal relation in which the speaker stands to the event explained, i.e. to indicate that the event is later or earlier than the time of the utterance.

Philosophers are not always aware of the supposed ontology. If the ontology they factually presuppose coincides with a four-dimensional event ontology they feel forced to account for human agency in an impersonal

way. If on the other hand they presuppose a richer ontology with continuants/endurers and thus accept tensed facts they are freer in accounting for human agency and emotions.

## Bibliography

- Cockburn, D. 1998 “Tense and Emotion”, in: Robin Le Poidevin (ed.), *Questions of Time and Tense*, Oxford, 77–91.
- Davidson, D. 1980 *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford.
- Dretske, F. 1991 *Explaining Behavior. Reasons in a World of Causes*, Cambridge MA.
- Gale, M. 2002 “Time, Temporality, and Paradox”, in: R.M. Gale (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Metaphysics*, Oxford.
- Hornsby, J. 1997 “Agency and Causal Explanation”, in: A.R. Mele (ed.), *The Philosophy of Action*, Oxford.
- McGinn, C. 1983 *The Subjective View. Secondary Qualities and Indexical Thoughts*, Oxford.
- Mellor, D.H. 1991 *Matters of Metaphysics*, Cambridge.
- Müller, T. 2002 *Arthur Priors Zeitlogik*, Paderborn.
- Nagel, T. 1970 *The Possibility of Altruism*, Princeton.
- Perry, J. 1993 *The Problem of the Essential Indexical and Other Essays*, Oxford.