

Book Reviews

José Luis Bermúdez, *Understanding “I”: Thought and Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 176 pp.

José Luis Bermúdez has been working on the notion of self and self-consciousness for the last two decades. In this book, *Understanding “I”: Thought and Language*, he is tackling the conceptual notion of self and self-consciousness. In order to fully understand things that Bermúdez is saying in this book and why he is saying them we need to look at some of his earlier works.

Bermúdez wrote four major philosophical books and numerous articles and publications. These books are (in chronological order): *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness* (1997), *Thinking without Words* (2003), *Decision Theory and Rationality* (2009) and *Understanding “I”: Thought and Language* (2017).¹ The two “middle books”, *Thinking without Words* and *Decision Theory and Rationality*, are not directly relevant to the book in question: *Understanding “I”: Thought and Language*. In *Thinking without Words* Bermúdez is trying to uncover the ontological status and syntactic structure of thoughts that prelinguistic creatures possess (prelinguistic infants, early hominids and animals). In *Decision Theory and Rationality* Bermúdez is trying to demonstrate that rationality can not be explained by any form of decision theory. The only other book in which Bermúdez is exploring the notion of self and self-consciousness (directly) is his first book: *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*. As it was said at the beginning, in order to evaluate and understand his latest work, *Understanding “I”: Thought and Language*, we need to spend some time looking at his previous work, namely, *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*.

The Paradox of Self-Consciousness is a book dedicated to resolving what Bermúdez calls the paradox of self-consciousness. Now, the point of the paradox is that an account of self-consciousness cannot avoid circularity, may this circularity be explanatory or constitutive. In order to give an

¹ There are four types of publications that are not included in this categorization. Firstly, books that are classified as introductions (*Philosophy of Psychology: A Contemporary Introduction* (2005), *Cognitive Science: An Introduction to the Science of the Mind* (2013; 2014)), secondly, books which Bermúdez is not a sole author of (*The Body and the Self* (1998)), thirdly, books that are focused on a single author (*Thought, Reference, and Experience: Themes from the Philosophy of Gareth Evans* (2005)), and lastly minor publications like articles and essays that are not full-fledged books. This exclusion enables us to track the author's thoughts on the subject more precisely.

adequate account of self-consciousness we need to analyse our capacity to think what he calls 'I'-thoughts. What are 'I'-thoughts? 'I'-thoughts are a special way (an ability or a capacity) we think about ourselves, involving concepts and descriptions, that we cannot put to work in thinking about other people and things—namely, the ability to apply those concepts and descriptions uniquely to ourselves. The capacity to think 'I'-thoughts is also fundamental in *Understanding "I": Thought and Language*. So, where is the paradox? The paradox consists in the following: In order to analyse the capacity to think 'I'-thoughts we need to analyse the ability to use the first-person pronoun which seems to require analyzing the capacity to think 'I'-thoughts. And here we have circularity. In order to resolve the dreadful paradox Bermúdez is, throughout the entire book, constructing the notion of prelinguistic self-consciousness.

Firstly, Bermúdez rejects what he calls *The Conceptual Requirement Principle*. *The Conceptual Requirement Principle* states that the range of contents which is permissible to attribute to a creature is directly determined by the concepts which that creature possesses. By doing so the author is stipulating the existence of a nonconceptual content. A nonconceptual content is a form of mental content which can be ascribed to a bearer of that content, without that bearer having to possess the concepts required to specify that content.

Secondly, Bermúdez accepts J. J. Gibson's notion of visual perception through his ecological approach. Briefly, he extracts from Gibson's work the notion of self that is based on spatial self-awareness, like the one in navigation, awareness of orientation and trajectory.

Thirdly, Bermúdez is using the notion of somatic proprioception. Somatic proprioception is a form of perception that provides to the perceiver detailed information about the perceiver's position, movement, limb disposition, and other bodily properties. For example: information about balance and posture, bodily disposition and muscular fatigue.

Lastly, Bermúdez is arguing, based on the relevant research, for the existence of prelinguistic social self-awareness. Prelinguistic social self-awareness is manifested in phenomena like joint selective visual attention and coordinated joint engagement which we can observe in infants.²

Thus, at the end of his book *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*, Bermúdez has constructed a solid ground for the notion of prelinguistic self-consciousness.

So, what's the point? The point is that in *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness* Bermúdez, in order to solve the paradox, uses the notions of nonconceptual content, somatic proprioception, visual kinaesthetics etc. to explore the notion of prelinguistic self-consciousness that lies beneath the surface of the iceberg (to use Bermúdez's metaphor from the preface of his current book). Now, nineteen years later Bermúdez, in his current book: *Understanding "I": Thought and Language*, returns to investigate the conceptual notion of self and self-consciousness. After discussing the notion of prelinguistic self-consciousness, he now investigates the surface of the iceberg – full-fledged linguistic (conceptual) self-consciousness.

² Certainly, the last four paragraphs cannot adequately present the argument put forward by Bermúdez in *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*. For a clear and full view of Bermúdez's argument, please see *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness* (1997).

Understanding "I": Thought and Language is structured in the following manner. The book has seven chapters (excluding the preface) and each chapter has between three to five subchapters. These seven chapters are:

1. "I": An essential indexical
2. Sense and understanding
3. Frege and Evans on the sense of "I"
4. Privacy, objectivity, symmetry
5. Token-sense and type-sense
6. I': Token-sense and type-sense
7. Explaining immunity to error through misidentification

The structure of *Understanding "I"* is similar to the structure of *The Paradox* in the following way. In both books, Bermúdez uses different tools, like constraints, conditions and criteria, in order to converge at the end of the book in a single exposition. In *The Paradox* it is an argument that solves the paradox of the title and in *Understanding "I"* it is the set of conditions that bring about the concept of "I". The structure is different in books like *Thinking without Words* and *Decision Theory and Rationality*. In *Thinking* the main point is in explaining the notion of nonlinguistic thought throughout ontology, epistemology and philosophy of language and in *Decision Theory* Bermúdez's goal was to prove that no decision theory can satisfy the necessary conditions for rationality.

Understanding "I" has a solid and clear structure overall, with chapters nicely complementing each other. The only objection could be the status of the last chapter: *Explaining immunity to error through misidentification*. In chapter six: *"I": Token-sense and type-sense* Bermúdez makes the main and final point of the book so the last chapter does not close the book properly. It would probably be better if chapter seven preceded chapter six. *Understanding "I"* employs the following methodology. Bermúdez does not engage in the ontology of selfhood in a straightforward manner. This is true for *The Paradox* as well. Instead, he is based on the presupposition that the self is embodied. That statement is widely and thoroughly explained and defended in *The Paradox*. In *Understanding "I"* Bermúdez takes the presupposition as face value.³ Bermúdez's primary focus is on the complex interrelations between the epistemology of self-consciousness and its functional role. And the way to approach the epistemology and functional role of self-consciousness is through an account of what it is to understand the first person pronoun.

In his first chapter, *"I": An essential indexical*, Bermúdez makes three main points. These points are: the Expressibility principle, Essential indexicality and the ineliminability of "I". The Expressibility principle simply states that any thinkable thought can in principle be linguistically expressed without residue or remainder. This is mostly uncontroversial. The principle is restricted in application to conceptual thoughts. It does not claim that there are no inexpressible truths, just that if there are inexpressible truths they are also unthinkable. What the Expressibility principle does

³ For the clear and full view of the proposition in question see *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness* (1997), especially chapter six: Somatic Proprioception and the Bodily Self.

philosophically is the following. It sets up an equivalence between entertaining “I” thoughts and understanding “I” sentences. The second point that he makes is Essential indexicality. In Bermúdez’s words:

Essential indexicality (agency): An agent will not typically act upon beliefs about herself unless she knows, through some thought that can only be expressed using “I”, that she herself is the person those beliefs are about. Essential indexicality (explanation): When explaining an action in terms of the agent’s beliefs about herself, at least one of those beliefs must have as its content an “I”-thought, viz. a thought that can only be expressed using “I”. (Bermúdez 2017: 9)

Bermúdez claims that “I” thoughts are fundamental in two relevant and distinctive ways. Firstly; “I” thoughts are the ones motivating an agent, which is called *Essential indexicality (agency)*, and secondly; “I” thoughts are used in explaining an action, which is called *Essential indexicality (explanation)*. The point Bermúdez is making is that “I” thoughts are fundamental because they integrate the agent’s beliefs about the world with her own first person perspective on the world.

From here he makes his final point that “I” thoughts are ineliminable and that any explanation of action without an essential indexical is necessarily incomplete.

In chapter two, *Sense and understanding*, Bermúdez is looking at two positions regarding the meaning of a sentence. Firstly, we have a Fregean position which states that the semantic value of a name is a concept that mediates between the name and its referent. That concept might be expressed by a definite description and Frege called it a sense.⁴ Secondly, we have Russell/Mill’s position which states that the semantic value of a name is simply its referent. Here Bermúdez is taking the “middle ground” which he calls the hybrid view. In the hybrid view Bermúdez keeps the notion of sense, but he is talking of *sense as understanding*. In Bermúdez’s words:

The sense of an expression, whether that expression is a proper name, a logical constant, a predicate or a complete sentence, is what a competent language-user understands when he understands that expression. (Bermúdez 2017: 26)

The chapter is structurally very similar to the second chapter of Bermúdez’s *Thinking without Words* where he discusses the nature of thought. There Bermúdez is also looking at two clashing positions; the Fregean approach: thoughts as the senses of sentences and the Fodor approach: the language of thought hypothesis.⁵

In chapters three and four (*Frege and Evans on the sense of “I” and Privacy, objectivity, symmetry*) Bermúdez sets out an exposition of Frege’s notion of the sense of “I” and Evans’s notion of the sense of “I”. Frege breaks the notion of the sense of “I” in two. We have a private sense of “I” and a public sense of “I”. A private sense of “I” is a special way in which I am presented to myself, and that sense is special, private and unshareable. A public sense of “I” is a linguistic device used for communication and understanding, and its shareable.

⁴ Bermúdez is using the term Fregean sense: The standard view which does not necessarily correspond with something we might call the Fregean sense: The classical view which would definitely have to involve some sort of Platonism.

⁵ For the clear and full view of the discussion in question see *Thinking without Words* (2003), especially chapter two: Two Approaches to the Nature of Thought.

There are three key components of Evans's notion of the sense of "I" that Bermúdez has highlighted. Firstly, Evans follows Frege regarding the notion of the sense of "I". Secondly Evans claims that the sense of "I" is private, but objective, which means that "I" thoughts should exist independently from anyone thinking them. Thirdly, Evans uses *immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first person pronoun* (the IEM property) in his explanation of "I" thoughts.⁶ The IEM property is a special kind of property that "I" thoughts have (arguably not all of them) which states that one cannot think an 'I'-thought without knowing that it is in fact about oneself. 'I'-thought cannot fail to identify the bearer of that thought. An example is the following:

1. John Smith thinks: *I am sitting in a chair.*
2. John Smith thinks: *John Smith is sitting in a chair.*

In (1) there is an "I" thought with an IEM property and in (2) there is an "I" thought without an IEM property.⁷

Bermúdez ultimately rejects both accounts: Frege's and Evans's, respectively. Frege's account of "I" thoughts is rejected because "I" thoughts that can tell us about self-consciousness (private sense of "I") are private and unshareable. Evans's account of "I" thoughts is rejected because "I" thoughts (according to Evans) can exist independently from anyone thinking them. So, what does Bermúdez take from Frege and Evans? From Frege he takes the concept of sense (in a manner described in chapter two) and from Evans he takes the IEM property.

Based on his interpretation of Frege and Evans, in chapter four: *Privacy, objectivity, symmetry*, Bermúdez makes (arguably) his most controversial claim of this book: The Symmetry Constraint.

The Symmetry Constraint: *An account of the sense of "I" must allow tokens of "I" to have the same sense as tokens of other personal pronouns such as "you" in appropriate contexts.* (Bermúdez 2017: 53).

Bermúdez offers three arguments in defence of The Symmetry Constraint: the same-saying argument, the logical argument and the epistemological argument. The same-saying argument states the following. In understanding a sentence one acquires knowledge of what that sentence says. That knowledge can be reported by a sentence that says the same thing as the original sentence. And finally, if one sentence accurately reports another, then we can reasonably assume that they express the same thought. The logical argument states that the possibility of equivalence in sense between first and second person pronouns is required for meaningful disagreement. Example that Bermúdez provides is that when I say "What you claim is false" and you say "What I claim is not false" then I seem to be denying what you are asserting. Lastly, the epistemological argument states that we need communication in order to transmit knowledge. So, in the right circumstances, when I hear you say something gives me a reason to believe

⁶ For a more detailed account of Bermúdez's thoughts on Evans see *Thought, Reference, and Experience: Themes from the Philosophy of Gareth Evans* (2005).

⁷ For additional clarification regarding IEM see James Pryor: *Immunity to error through misidentification* (1999), Simon Prosser and François Recanati: *Immunity to Error through Misidentification: New Essays* (2012).

it and, if true, it counts as knowledge. Then it follows that the content in both cases is the same.

There are several reasons for concern regarding The Symmetry Constraint. Firstly, The Symmetry Constraint is highly context sensitive. Bermúdez seems to be aware of this fact. That is why his definition ends with: *in appropriate contexts*. Nevertheless, it takes a certain amount of explanatory power away from the constraint in question. Secondly, it could be argued that Bermúdez takes Frege's notion of sense too far and that this notion of sense would be unrecognizable to Frege. Lastly, The Symmetry Constraint could be seen as very strange and counter-intuitive. It seems to us that *I* and *you* cannot have the same sense.

In chapter five, *Token-sense and type-sense*, after installing The Symmetry Constraint, Bermúdez takes a necessary course of action: he breaks the notion of sense in two. On the one hand there is a token-sense: what a speaker or hearer understands when they understand a particular utterance of "I" in a particular context and on the other hand there is a type-sense: what allows a speaker to be described as understanding the linguistic expression "I". Or in the context when we are talking about grasping the truth condition of a sentence involving indexicals:

Grasping the type-sense of an indexical requires:

(a) being aware of how the reference of the indexical is determined by the context of utterance (b) knowing in general terms what it would be for the sentence featuring the indexical to be true (without necessarily being able to identify the referent of the indexical)

Grasping the token-sense of an indexical requires: (a) being able to exploit features of the context of utterance to determine the reference of the indexical (b) knowing a specific truth condition (where this requires being able to identify the referents of the indexical) (Bermúdez 2017: 64)

There are two important questions to be asked here. Firstly, why is breaking the notion of sense in two relevant or useful? Secondly, why is this distinction (token-sense/ type-sense) different from other distinctions of the same type (Frege, Perry and Kaplan)? Bermúdez is claiming that we need the distinction in order to put forward a meaningful account of conceptual self-consciousness. He also claims that he is solving more problems than Frege, Perry and Kaplan. We will see why when we take a look at the next chapter.

Chapter six, *"I": Token-sense and type-sense*, is the main chapter of the book. It is here that Bermúdez summons all the parts of previous chapters and presents his notion of conceptual self-consciousness through understanding the sense of "I". In order to have a satisfactory account of the sense of "I" (token-sense and type-sense) we need to satisfy five constraints.

Constraint 1 (Essential Indexicality): Explain the distinctive cognitive role of "I"-thoughts, as reflected in the two principles Essential Indexicality (Agency) and Essential Indexicality (Explanation).

Constraint 2 (Shareability): Allow thoughts containing the sense of "I" to be shareable.

Constraint 3 (Symmetry): Allow tokens of "I" to have the same sense as tokens of other personal pronouns such as "you" in appropriate contexts.

Constraint 4 (Frege's Criterion): Individuate senses in accordance with

Frege's criterion, so that no two token-senses can be the same if it is possible for a rational thinker to take incompatible attitudes to them.

Constraint 5 (Truth Conditions): Accommodate the distinction between knowing in general terms what it would be for the sentence featuring the indexical to be true (without necessarily being able to identify the referent of the indexical) and knowing a specific truth condition (where this requires being able to identify the referents of the indexical). (Bermúdez 2017: 74–75)

Bermúdez claims that his account of the sense of "I" satisfies the five constraints. This is the main reason why he believes that his account of the sense of "I" solves more problems and has a greater explanatory power from the other accounts (Frege, Perry and Kaplan). As said before, *Constraint 3 (Symmetry)* is probably the most controversial of them.

In his last chapter, *Explaining immunity to error through misidentification*, Bermúdez presents his account for the IEM property. According to Bermúdez not all "I" thoughts have the IEM property. He claims that judgments with "I" as subject (which are conceptual) have the IEM property because they are based on identification-free sources (which are nonconceptual). Identification-free sources are: introspection, somatic proprioception/kinesthesia, visual proprioception/kinesthesia and autobiographical memory.

This is quite a bold claim. The point that Bermúdez is making is that the nature of the IEM property does not rest upon the indexical but on the predicate. It is a special way of receiving information (from identification-free sources) that gives rise to a special kind of predicates that makes the IEM property. The question still remains: Why is it the case that only judgments that contain a special kind of predicates that are based on a special way of receiving information (introspection, somatic proprioception/kinesthesia, visual proprioception/kinesthesia and autobiographical memory) have the IEM property?

Understanding "I": Thought and Language is overall a concisely written and well-structured book. Bermúdez builds his case precisely and methodically. In each chapter, Bermúdez argues a specific case that is later used as a component for the construction of his notion of conceptual self-consciousness. The exception is the final chapter that does not conclude the book properly because it opens a potentially new subject. At the end the question arises: Does Bermúdez's account of conceptual self-consciousness work? The answer will be in a form of a question: Does it solve more problems than it creates? And that is up to the reader to decide.

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