

**DEIXIS AND PERSONHOOD:  
A NEW PHILOSOPHICAL ACCOUNT**

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**Abstract.** *This paper claims that deixis is over and above a semantico-pragmatic phenomenon, and that it should be analyzed primarily epistemologically and ontologically. Most mainstream accounts of deixis in language simply overlook this point and emphasize the fact that although deixis is more attentional and intentional, it still remains elusive for any semantic and pragmatic framework. Our paper attempts to pave the way for a treatment of deictic phenomena that is based on the notion of 'personhood', i.e. on the pre-reflective perception of space-time, which is, furthermore, one of the basic tenets of intersubjectivity in human cognition. This is evident as lived space is deeply intertwined with deixis, or, if one wishes so, the other way round. It seems obvious that constant shifts of personal subjectivity (dependent on contingent intersubjectivity) undermine the rationalist and empiricist standpoints about there being one monolithic percept called 'reality'.*

**Key words:** *deixis, personhood, intersubjectivity, topological grid*

A BRIEF BIONIC PREAMBLE

Ilene, a lieutenant in the US Army Medical Corps deployed in 2009 to Afghanistan suffered extensive injuries from an improvised explosive device planted by the roadside near the city of Kandahar. A paraplegic with an amputated right leg and forearm, Ilene is confined to a wheelchair, retaining very limited use of her left hand and right elbow. Ilene, who lives alone in a small, three-room apartment, is a prime candidate for receipt of a prototype "smart wheelchair" named Otto. Otto, as currently conceived, is one of several classes of assistive robot whose principal mission is to help people like Ilene navigate their familiar surroundings. Otto comes equipped with visual sensors and a *verbal joystick* that will allow Ilene to command Otto using short vocal commands, such as "a little to the left," or "over here," or "over there," as well as sense urgency and distress based on prosodic features of Ilene's voice: "not there...HERE." With sentinel cameras mounted above Ilene as well as sentry cameras mounted ahead and directed at

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Ilene's eyes, Otto will align "his" exteroception of the immediate environment with her gaze, so that *over here* means something like "move 3 feet in the direction I am looking" whereas *over there* means something like "move 6 feet in the direction I am looking." During the observer learning phase of Otto's calibration to Ilene's world, Otto will learn that "'over there' + eye gaze to Ilene's right" will mean that it will move 12" closer to the target than if Ilene had uttered these words while gazing to his left.<sup>1</sup>

If successful, Otto would become an attenuated *second person*, a *you* to Ilene's *I*, and together, a *we* acting *in, among, and on* an environment filled with familiar *hes, shes, its, these, those* in and around familiar *heres, theres, and yonders*, all of which occur over habitual stretches of *nows*. The successful prototype will thus provide a deictic scheme for solving Ilene's way-finding problems. Otto would earn his proper name in virtue of the fact that it is genuinely interactive with Ilene, constituting both a subjective "we" and objective "us." They constitute a "we" when Ilene and Otto interact to move and manipulate the world around them; they constitute an "us" when Ilene and Otto can be referred to felicitously as one corporate agent.

Human interaction with semi-autonomous robots is an increasingly profitable field of application, and the corresponding deictic 'strategy' is a natural and efficient way to bind orienting movements of the body, visual fixation, and manual position with perception, cognition, and action to objects in the world, for it avoids the computational overloads and possible engineering flaws.

Conspicuously absent from the deictic strategy is temporality. Otto and Ilene coexist in a series of *here-nows*, for the designers do not imagine that a command, such as "it's in the same place as yesterday" or "a little to the left tomorrow morning." Otto cannot imagine yesterdays and tomorrows—he is smart but not that smart. Otto follows what we call a *topographic grid*—a detailed and finely tuned map of everyday concrete space (or 'habitus') constituting an unquestioned and intuitively reliable alignment between Ilene and Otto—two 'laminated' agents: the intentionality of Ilene determines the intentionality of Otto in a non-reciprocal, master/slave, relationship. Otto, however, remains extremely limited in his range of action. It lacks what we call a *topological grid*.

The present article is about deixis and personhood as a function of a topological grid. It is about what constitutes such a grid, how it develops in human, intersubjective interaction over large stretches of developmental and cultural time, but most of all, about its place in a wider phenomenological and philosophical framework. The conclusion that we hope to reach ought to account for deixis as a phenomenological problem rather than a purely semantic one.

#### A COGNITIVE AND PHILOSOPHICAL OVERVIEW

Ilene and Otto could be set against the backdrop of some interesting ideas about networking machines and combinations of disparate unities of different components. Thus Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, two Chilean biologists and philosophers of science came up with an attractive albeit a little quaint notion of autopoiesis some forty years ago: "An autopoietic machine is a machine organized (defined as a unity) as a

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<sup>1</sup> The Otto and Ilene illustration has been provided by prof. Todd Oakley of Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH. It was used in one of the first versions of a joint paper we started working on in 2012-2013.

network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the *topological domain* of its realization as such a network” (emphasis *Dj.V.*) (Maturana & Varela, 1973/1991: 78).

One more oft-quoted passage from the same text by Maturana and Varela is the following: “[...] the space defined by an autopoietic system is self-contained and cannot be described by using dimensions that define another space. When we refer to our interactions with a concrete autopoietic system, however, we project this system on the space of our manipulations and make a description of this projection” (ibid., p. 89).

The Maturana-Varela approach was primarily intended to explain the nature of living beings, but it was inevitable that it would also be applied to other entities: this is so because autopoietic systems are “structurally coupled” with their ancillary elements, they appear embedded in a dynamic that can be labeled a sensory-motor coupling. This dynamic can be viewed as a simple form of knowledge or cognition (ibid., p. 89)

Another relevant philosophical notion that touches on the Ilene-Otto vignette is the ‘extended mind’, recently reintroduced by Clark and Chalmers (I am purposely stating that they reintroduced’ this idea because I believe, just like Andy Clark, that it was Dewey who first came up with a clear statement about our body being the extension of our mind: “Hands and feet, apparatus and appliances of all kinds are as much a part of it [thinking] as changes in the brain” (Dewey, J., *Essays in Experimental Logic*, quoted in Clark 2011, Kindle edition, location 42).

This seems very obvious notwithstanding the fact that both accounts feature Otto, one as a digitally learning contraption and the other a patient suffering from Alzheimer’s. If the issue of deixis came up in a debate between a linguist and a philosopher, the two would most likely agree that deixis pertains to contextually-dependent references to person, place, and time. Of course, the linguist would prefer to stick to her own preferred term, deixis, while the philosopher would label the phenomenon ‘indexicality’.

We believe that deixis is not only a semantico-pragmatic phenomenon but largely epistemic, and, *in ultima linea*, ontological. This appears to have been neglected in many mainstream analyses of deixis, even though it seems clear enough that deixis is far from being only context-dependent as it is much more attentional and, above all, intentional. Thus deixis is highly elusive and largely ungraspable by a formal semantico-pragmatic theory. We also claim that the true nature of deixis, and, consequently, personhood, is based on the (un)conscious perception of time-consciousness which is a fundamental tenet of intersubjectivity in the human cognitive system ensconced in the horizon-structure of our empirical activities. As space is deeply embedded in deixis, we would like to claim that deixis, due to its ‘impermanence’ (Bachelard 1959/1994), does not strictly belong to semiotics and, similarly, cannot be subsumed under a sustainable semantic theory. It appears that constant shifts of personal subjectivity undermine the rationalist and empiricist standpoint about there being one monolithic percept that people have dubbed ‘reality’ from times immemorial.

## THE EARLY PRECURSORS

One of the philosophical ‘precursors’ of human quotidian navigation through space-time and the logic behind it was Edmund Husserl who applied the already existing term (phenomenology) to a process of obtaining knowledge. Phenomenology was described by him as a method that “lays bare the ‘sources’ from which the basic concepts and ideal laws of pure logic ‘flow’, and back to which they must once more be traced, so as to give them all the ‘clearness and distinctness’ needed for an understanding, and for an epistemological critique, of pure logic (Husserl, E. LI, Findlay I: 166; Hua XIX/1:6–7). Husserl did *not* wish to be merely a logician because logicians search for objective meanings and their formal regulation, as he wanted to examine the essential structures of cognition and their correlation to things known. When he said that “we must go back to the things themselves” (Wir wollen auf die ‘Sachen selbst’ zurückgehen, LI, Findlay I: 168; Hua XIX/1: 10), he wanted to emphasize that phenomenology aimed at a clarification of the nature of logical concepts by tracing their origins in intuition.

In his *Logical Investigations* (abbreviated as “LI” here) Husserl argued that the proper way to examine the units of consciousness that an ordinary speaker vocalizes in expressing a proposition dealing with intentional experiences has to be based on the time/space continuum, simultaneously expressing ‘something as something’, exhibiting Franz Brentano’s concept of intentionality. Husserl, in a manner resembling Alexius Meinong, thought that our cognitive content may sometimes lack a corresponding object – thus, if one thinks of a concept presented by J. L. Borges, called “Bahamut” (a formless, measureless obese fish often used to describe the spaces between heaven, earth, and hell, conjured by C. S. Lewis), even in this case that particular thought has some sort of content. Such a mental process does not have a corresponding object, that is true, agrees Husserl, and the intentional act is ‘merely as of’ but not really of an object.

Husserl stood on the shoulders of a giant, Franz Brentano, his former teacher, and it was through Brentano that Husserl learned of the medieval theory of ‘*intentio*’, or the mind’s zeroing in onto objects one has in thought or perception. Husserl built upon this and consequently rejected “representationalist” accounts of intentionality, e.g., the so-called mental image theory, which claims that intentional experiences represent “intra-mental” pictorial representations of objects, where like other pictures such images may exist without there being a depicted object in the actual world. Husserl maintains that such a view leads to a “false duplication” of objects and, at the same time, presupposes what an adequate conception of a pictorial representation should be - only another ‘representationalist’ account of a phenomenon.

Closely connected to this is the analysis of utterances of “essential occasional” (wesentlich okkasionelle Ausdrücke, LI I §26), i.e., systematically context-sensitive, expressions like “I am here now”, that are nothing else but deictic elements or indexicals. Actually, Husserl distinguishes two types of expressions: objective and ‘subjective’. The latter are prone to meaning shifts depending on the context and are made up of pronouns such as “I”, “you”, demonstratives (*this*, *that*), and temporal adverbs (*now*, *then*) obtaining their meaning from the context while seemingly having a fixed sense of their own.

There are two important senses in which Husserl is important for any sensible discussion of deixis today: first of all, his idea of ‘horizontality’ when he said that every statement must be located in a context-dependent niche before we can comprehend its precise meaning: for example, when someone refers to ‘the birth of Christ’ or ‘the sun’, when both of these

require deictic clarification, and second, the idea of a so-called ‘horizontal gestalt’ (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008: 91) which enhances significantly the understanding of the concept of consciousness by defining an intuition of the just-past sense of the object, because this is exactly what is required if “perception of succession is to be possible” (ibid., 91). This second insight is profound because Husserl was aware that no mere succession of conscious states guarantees consciousness of succession. This is so because a perception of an object cannot be a perception of ‘now’, “rather, any perception of the present slice of an object includes a retention of the just-past slice and a protention of what is about to occur. *Perceptual presence is therefore not punctual*; it is a field in which now, not-now, and not-yet-now are given in a horizontal gestalt” (ibid., 91). This makes it possible to perceive an enduring object.

Husserl did concede that in the First Edition of the *Logical Investigations* he had not understood the ‘horizontal intentionality’ which insisted that the understanding of a statement requires attention to its horizons. *The corollary was that a formal system must rely on the support of context-relative elements, in other words the support of deixis*. This perception of an object with added perception of context is nothing else but perception of an ‘object-in-context’. As we have posited the existence of a subject that is ‘impermanent’ within an impermanent world, we are free to draw the conclusion that a single subject and the sum total of her navigating vectors in a given topological grid is insufficient to define the sum total of the subject’s perception. This appears really to be the case as any perceptual process includes other subjects’ percepts as well. It is only natural to assume that this important issue has been on the agenda by many and is somewhat of a ‘critical issue’. Gallagher and Zahavi ask “Is there room for ‘sociality in the public nature of perceptual objects’?” (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008: 114).

#### THE MODERNS: MERLEAU-PONTY AND STRAWSON

Pertaining to the issues discussed so far, Merleau-Ponty claimed that it must be the correlate of one’s own consciousness but also the sum of all and any consciousness one encounters (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 338). When one starts a conversation with someone, then one does not converse with the ‘flow of private sensations indirectly related to [one’s own] through the medium of interposed signs’, but with someone who ‘has a living experience of the same world as [one’s own]’ and who is placed in the same topological grid together with one (ibid., 405). Merleau-Ponty goes on to say that one’s own perspective on the world is not determined solely by one’s own perception but overlaps with the perspectives of others.

“This observation eventually makes Merleau-Ponty claim that I have no perceptual monopoly on being; rather, the objects only display themselves to me partially, and thus have a right to ‘many other witnesses besides me’” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 15–16; 170).

In other words, my perceptual objects are not exhausted in their appearance for me; rather, each object always possesses a horizon of co-existing profiles, which although being momentarily inaccessible to me – I cannot see the front and the back of a chair simultaneously – could very well be perceived by other subjects. Since the perceptual object is always there for others too, whether or not such other subjects do, in fact, appear on the scene, the object refers to those other subjects, and is for that very reason intrinsically *intersubjective*. “It does not exist solely for me, but refers to intersubjectivity, and so does my intentionality whenever I am directed at intersubjectively accessible objects” (Gallagher & Zahavi, ibid., 114).

Another noteworthy attempt to help to understand and explain deixis came from P. F. Strawson. Strawson's ideas come to mind when we think about deixis *as not only epistemological* (the weak thesis), but also *ontological* (the strong thesis) because he postulated the necessary existence of a spatio-temporal framework that could eventually "host" and, possibly, clarify our existence. He wanted to discuss 'questions about our own conceptual scheme' (Strawson, 1959/1996: 30) but, seemingly, fell prey to his own ontological and epistemological indecision regarding the mind/body issue, which we will try to clarify later on. He thought that an account aiming to explain our conceptual framework had to overcome the difficulty inherent in any attempt to produce an elaborate description of "a network of spatially and temporally related things and incidents because we can never be sure of producing an individuating description of a single particular item, for we can never rule out the 'possibility of another exactly similar network'." This particular act of anxious anticipation of possible extraneous influences lurking in the background is the highlight of Strawson's genuinely deep insight into the problem and marks a heroic endeavor to bridge the Continental/Analytical divide (or Husserl *vs* Frege; in other words, subjective acts of knowing something *vs* objective or logical truths). To experience this theoretical anxiety is, as we have seen, to overlook the fact that we, the speakers, the users of the dating and placing systems, have our own place in that system and know that place; that we ourselves, therefore, and our own immediate environment, provide a point of reference which individuates the *network* and, hence, helps to individuate the particulars located in the network.

A different, but not unrelated, error is made by those who, although very aware that here-and-now provides a point of reference, still suppose that 'here' and 'now' and 'this' and all such utterance-centered words refer to something private and personal to each individual user of them (Ibid., 30). (Needless to say, the private and personal sense data is the default perspective of the Analytical approach to epistemology.) The anxiety is induced by the following: "They see how for each person at any moment there is on this basis a single spatio-temporal network; but see also that, on this basis, there are as many networks, as many worlds, as there are persons."

What happens often in such circumstances is that the defense mechanism is invoked immediately by reverting to the private point of reference and avoiding the public point of view which leads to the inability to recognize that humans are 'in the system' and professing that the 'system is in us' or that each one has her/his own system within her/him.

Slightly earlier, on page 26, in the first part of the book, *Bodies*, Strawson discusses "the relative movement of bodies", a notion that is reminiscent of Bachelard's idea about 'impermanence'. Snowdon claims that "Strawson further points out that since we need to update this relational framework over time as we move around, we need to be able to re-identify objects and also places encountered at different times. Strawson draws an epistemological conclusion from this. As our ability to maintain a grasp on the spatio-temporal framework depends on acceptance of such identifications it is incoherent to be sceptical about the procedures we rely on to confirm them while still thinking in terms of the spatio-temporal framework itself" (Snowdon, P., 2009, accessed on July 13, 2012).

Yet another aspect of Strawson's insight into the *networking of egocentric and sociocentric relations* can be seen in his analysis of mind ascription: "In order to have this type of concept, one must be both a self-ascriber and an other-ascriber of such predicates, and must see every other as a self-ascriber. In order to understand this type of concept, one must acknowledge that there is a kind of predicate which is unambiguously and adequately

ascribable both on the basis of observation of the subject of the predicate and not on this basis, i.e. independently of observation of the subject : the second case is the case where the ascriber is also the subject. If there were no concepts answering to the characterization I have just given, we should indeed have no philosophical problem about the soul; but equally we should not have our concept of a person” (Strawson, 1959/1996: 108). Thus, Strawson actually suggests that the only way to get to know things is to juxtapose our personhood in relation to other individuals, thus paving the way for a more comprehensive notion of intersubjectivity that has turned out to be one of the crucial, if not the sole crucial facet of the human ability to perceive data, process information and share it in multiple ways, through time and space. It seems apparent that this valiant effort by Strawson to overcome the previously-mentioned divide is inadequate on many counts, the most important of which is his strenuous emphasis of the corporeal object (body) among other bodies, notwithstanding his later acknowledgment in *Individuals* that there has to be a need for other, mental, ‘substances’ that have to be taken into account. Strawson writes that it is undoubtedly true that one conceives oneself as a bodily object among other bodies, as we have already stated. These bodies are ‘objects’ among other bodily objects, or ‘men among men’. The subjectivity here of personhood, or the personal pronoun ‘I’ has an empirical reference, but that seems to be his point as to be self-conscious we must first of all see oneself as (primarily) a corporeal entity surrounded by other entities akin to us. Under this condition, Strawson goes on “our personal pronouns, the ‘I’ included, have an empirical reference (see above)” (1966: 102). It becomes clear how Strawson sees self-consciousness – for him it is a notion in which a person becomes identifiable through, or ‘by way’ of his body, that is, his ‘bodily self-perception of a material entity’. This makes perfect sense to Strawson “for only such material thing ‘can be picked out from others’ identifiable by ordinary physical criteria and described in ordinary physical terms” (Strawson 1959: 89). Logic appears to dictate the view that bodies should be viewed as referential access points for both the self-ascriber as well as its ‘derivates’ stemming from the generic self (‘me’, ‘mine’) that start operating in self-ascriptive discourse or subjective inner states of one’s mind.

Thus for Strawson a ‘person’ does have self-consciousness because we can make sure as to who the ‘body’ and the ‘inner states (of the body)’ belong to. His concept of a person revolves around a type of entity that both predicates ascribing conscious states and does the same for corporeal characteristics, so that the given physical framework points to one and the same single individual of that single type (Strawson 1959: 101-102).

It was stated earlier that we would try to clarify Strawson’s indecisiveness pertaining to the mind/body problem. As it happens, in *Individuals*, he strongly opposes Cartesian dualism by referring to the *no-ownership fallacy* that he finds inherent in it. Strawson’s ‘descriptive metaphysics’ claims that “only those things whose ownership is logically transferable can be owned at all”, which, put in plain English, means that a conscious experience in a subject cannot be said to ‘belong’ to that particular consciousness as it is not *logically* transferable. Therefore, claims Strawson, the phenomenal experiences of one’s consciousness, one’s self, or the ego, are only secondary while the person is a real primitive, always viewed as some kind of ‘whole’. States of consciousness cannot be ascribed unless they are ascribed to the primary element of this ‘virtual duality’, to the person that is *logically prior* to the secondary element, that of consciousness.

At this point, we have to emphasize that any attempt at postulating a metaphysical description of person(s) and at disentangling the intricacies of the mind/body issue by Strawson does not jeopardize our own goal, reaching a *topological grid* whose innumerable

intersections and inextricable connections with ‘space-time’ can only be further elucidated by sharing some of the ideas put forward by P. F. Strawson. We should state clearly though that our appreciation for Strawson’s ideas is somewhat hampered by his mainly *semantic* and *epistemological* shortcomings. One example of criticism might be sufficient here: in his treatment of the category of ‘person’ as primitive, one has to stress the fact that ‘person’ *should not be able to refer to an entity that already exists (we said earlier to exist ‘virtually’, or ‘conceptually’)*. Of course, this existence hinges on both types of predicates, those predicating corporeal entities, and those predicating mental states.

Notwithstanding all this, Strawson does argue along the lines of ordinary language (speech) that is relevant to our general thesis. The inner states (of consciousness) posited by him are not merely private occurrences but surely bodily locutions belonging to a person always conceived as a corporeal object in a grid of other (constantly) moving corporeal objects. Any report given to other persons about myself takes for granted my understanding what the act of reporting implies. Strawson’s descriptive metaphysics allows and predicts a possibility of a topological framework generically similar to the one we postulate as he writes that ‘speaking to him I understand that for him I too am a ‘he’, and my report includes the self-understanding from the standpoint of the outside observer, i.e. of the third grammatical person...’ (Strawson 1959: 100).

#### SUMMING UP

To reiterate yet again, we believe that deixis is not only a semantico-pragmatic phenomenon but largely epistemic, and, *in ultima linea*, ontological. This appears to have been neglected in many mainstream analyses of deixis, even though it seems that *deixis is far from being only context-dependent as it is more attentional and, above all, intentional*. Thus deixis is elusive and largely ungraspable by a formal semantico-pragmatic theory.

We have also claimed that the true nature of deixis, and, consequently, personhood, is based on the pre-reflective perception of space-time, a fundamental tenet of intersubjectivity in the human cognitive system ensconced in the horizon-structure of human empirical activities. Lived space is deeply embedded in deixis, or else, the other way around. We believe that deixis, due to its ‘*impermanence*’ cannot be subsumed under a sustainable semantic theory because it seems obvious that constant shifts of personal subjectivity (dependent on contingent intersubjectivity) undermine the rationalist and empiricist standpoints about there being one monolithic percept called ‘reality’.

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## DEIKSA I LIČNOST: JEDAN NOV FILOSOFSKI OPIS

*U ovom radu tvrdimo da se fenomen deikse treba da razmatra najpre epistemološki, a potom i ontološki, pre nego neuspešnim analizama vezanim za semantiku ili pragmatiku. Veći broj pokušaja analize deikse u jeziku zanemaruje ovu ideju i govori da je deiksa zapravo više intencionalna i usmerena na referentni objekat, međutim takvo gledište i dalje ne omogućava klasičnu semantičko-pragmatičku razradu. Imajući u vidu ovu činjenicu, pokušavamo da dokažemo da je deiksu moguće opisati uz pomoć opisa "ličnosti u ontološkom smislu, tj. kao predrefleksnu percepciju prostora-vremena, u širem kontekstu intersubjektivnosti ljudske kognicije. Prostor u kome živimo neraskidivo je vezan za deiksu, dok deiksa zahteva takav prostor kako bi opstajala. Konstantna kretanja personalne subjektivnosti, kontingentna u odnosu na intersubjektivnost, urušavaju empiričku viziju monolitske "realnosti", baš iz pomenutih razloga.*

Ključne reči: *deiksa, ličnost, intersubjektivnost, topološka matrica*