AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ESSENTIAL INDEXICALITY

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The prevailing notion that the problem of essential indexicals must be solved through the theory of meaning of attitude ascriptions is incorrect. Well-known attempts to solve the problem along those lines, e.g., the proposals of Lewis (1979) and Perry (1979), have rested on the overly optimistic assumption that there is no limit in principle to the access one may have to the contents of someone else’s thoughts, including their knowledge. That assumption is challenged in this essay. The hazards associated with limited accessibility can be and indeed must be alleviated by an epistemological theory in such a way that allows for a new nonsemantic approach to the problem.

The following is an outline of the arguments in favor of this approach. In the first part, the problem of essential indexicals and the familiar corollary thesis that such indexicals are not reducible to nonindexicals is briefly reviewed. In the second part, indexical irreducibility is shown to hold for a range of explanations of theoretical rationality in addition to the basic explanations of action in which the irreducibility is typically illustrated. Since these explanations must rely on normative features of a background epistemological theory, a minimally adequate epistemology must be able to support such explanations. This is the first premise of the central argument for the thesis that an adequate epistemology accepts limited accessibility. That argument is completed in the third part by establishing that no semantic alternative to the propositional attitude analysis of belief and knowledge offers a real escape from limited accessibility. This includes a detailed criticism of two prominent types of alternatives to the propositional view. In the fourth part, some of the epistemological implications of accepting limited accessibility are described. Tensions between limited accessibility and assumptions about the possibility of omniscience and public defensibility as necessary conditions of knowing are shown to be avoidable on particular epistemological theories, such as recent forms of foundationism and coherentism. Although they may face other unrelated difficulties, such theories may allow for limited accessibility without loss of plausibility for that reason. All of this is in support of the point that the absorption of limited accessibility into an adequate epistemological theory yields a new resolution to the problem of essential indexicals.

I. The Problem

Indexicals are essential insofar as they are irreducible elements of certain explanations. That such indexicals must occur in explanations of practical rationality is the indexical irreducibility thesis. The problem is that the...
irreducibility thesis appears to entail limited accessibility, i.e., instances of thoughts that are possible for some individuals and not possible for others.

The problem is usually illustrated by a case of a given action that cannot be explained without an indexical attitude ascription. The description of the problem and the following arguments about it will focus on the first person pronoun “I” as it is used as a pure indexical and not other pure indexicals such as “now,” impure indexical demonstratives such as “this,” or quasi-indexicals such as “he, himself.” The belief ascription, “I believe that I am in danger,” figures in an explanation of cases such as my act of fleeing a given location in which I am in imminent danger, e.g., as would be the case if I were a target of assassination. Dramatic as it may be, this is a case where the action is obvious and obviously reasonable. It will be observed that such an explanation cannot succeed if it is given in exclusively nonindexical terms, such as my name “Jeremy,” the description “The man who is being targeted for assassination,” etc. If I attempted to explain my action even partially in terms of nonindexical ascriptions such as “I believe that Jeremy is in danger” or “I believe that the man who is the target of assassination is in danger,” my action would not be explained because any of these can be true without my believing that I am in danger. Or what comes to the same, what motivates me to flee is not my belief that Jeremy is in danger, but my belief that I am in danger. The action can be explained in terms of non-indexicals only if it is supposed that some other indexical attitude ascriptions, such as “I believe that I am Jeremy,” are assumed to be true. Either way: a residual indexical remains in any successful explanation of the case. Thus, a complete reduction of indexicals to nonindexicals is out of the question. This sort of story, unimportant in itself, illustrates the general point that a given explanation may depend on indexicals for its success, and it is in this sense that indexicals are essential.

The irreducibility of indexicals together with the propositional analysis of the attitude ascriptions appears to imply that accessibility to contents ascribed by means of indexicals is limited in principle. According to the propositional analysis, when I believe that (1).

(1) I am in danger.

I believe the proposition that I am in danger. The propositional theory analyzes ascriptions partially in terms of the contents of the ascribed attitudes. Thus, the ascription “I believe that I am in danger” is analyzed in terms of a relational attitude between a subject and a proposition that is the content of the attitude.

Two general types of theories about the nature of propositions can be distinguished according to how propositions are individuated. According to one type of theory or individuation of propositions, the proposition I believe when I believe (1) can be expressed by (2).

(2) Jeremy is in danger.

Note that this and any other respectable theory of propositions allows that the linguistic mechanisms differ in (1) and (2). It is just that such a difference does not make for a difference in propositions expressed. So although only I can use (1) to express the proposition that I am in danger, traditional accounts allow that the same proposition may be expressed in other terms than the first person pronoun, e.g., (2). Yet this individuation of propositions is too coarse grained to work in the envisioned explanation of action. I can believe that Jeremy is in danger without believing that I am. If (1) and (2) express the same proposition in the belief ascriptions, then it is impossible to make the requisite distinction between my belief that (1) and my belief that (2) in terms of content. Thus, the theory of propositions that does not distinguish between proposi-
tions expressed by (1) and (2) renders the propositional explanation of my action incapable of success.

If (1) and (2) express different propositions, then the content of my belief is in principle inaccessible by anyone other than me. For if (1) and (2) express different propositions in belief ascriptions, then the content of the belief that I am in danger differs from the content of any other’s belief that Jeremy is in danger. The same irreducibility point holds as well for nonindexicals other than my name as well as any other indexicals besides the first person. The content of the belief that I am in danger differs from the content of every belief ascribed with a co-referring nonindexical expression, \( \alpha \). Yet since only I can use “I” to refer to me, the contents of others’ beliefs about me are limited to propositions that \( \alpha \) is in danger. Thus, the content of my belief that I am in danger is in principle inaccessible to anyone other than myself. The content of my belief in (1) suffers from a kind of conditional unthinkablity and unknowablity that is based on a condition of strict numerical identity: if you are not me, then you cannot believe, know, or think what I do when I believe that I am in danger. This is precisely the worry of limited accessibility. If it is assumed that such limited accessibility is impossible, for reasons to be explained in a later section, then the propositional view is false.

This traditional formulation of the problem appears to present a challenge to the propositional view. However, as an argument against the propositional view, it requires the crucial assumption that the contents of attitudes such as belief are, in principle, sharable; i.e., the assumption that there is no limited accessibility. This is a particularly important assumption when applied to knowledge: that what is known to one person is, in principle at least, knowable by someone else. The possible motivations for that assumption will be examined after the scope of the irreducibility thesis is expanded and the alternatives to the propositional view are criticized.

II. A Minimally Adequate Epistemology Requires Essential Indexicals

Indexicals are extremely important to epistemology. At minimum, an epistemological theory must support a range of explanations that employ epistemic concepts such as justification, reason, and knowledge. Whatever the grander goals of the theory to account for classical problems, e.g., an answer to skepticism or the regress problem, it must at least provide principles by which epistemic merit may be determined and explained in easy cases. Another way of putting the same point is that ordinary explanations of action and knowledge in terms of practical or theoretical norms require a background epistemic theory that provides principles governing those norms. The closure principle for knowledge is just one example of a commonly accepted principle along these lines, though it has not been assumed to be required here. Whether it is required is at least partially a matter of how well it works in explanations of actual cases. All that is at issue here is that it is a necessary condition of any adequate epistemological theory that its principles support rather than prevent the success of explanations in which the theory plays its background role. Some of the explanations of easy cases of action incorporate indexical attitude ascriptions. This is evident from the above case of my fleeing danger. Yet the same point has not been established for easy cases of knowledge. Though it has not been often noted, explanations of theoretical rationality and reason explanations generally may be as essentially indexical as explanations of action. Importantly, such explanations include explanations of knowledge of one’s own attitudes, for instance, knowledge of one’s own lack of knowledge. These are es-
sentially indexical, as can be shown from the following case. Suppose that I have learned that I do not know that p, where formerly I had incorrectly believed myself to know that p. The explanation of my knowledge that I do not know p will make reference to reasons in the usual way by relating this knowledge to other relevant attitudes ascribed to me. Such an explanation cannot succeed without indexicals. For the replacement of “I” in the explanation destroys the force of the explanation. This is so both for what is to be explained, my knowledge of my lack of knowledge that p, as well as the reasons that are used to explain it. If I do not know that I do not know p but I know only that Jeremy does not know p, then my knowledge of my own lack of knowledge has not been properly described. For it is possible for me to know that Jeremy does not know that p and yet fail to know that I do not know that p. Indexicals are also essential to the other attitudes by which this knowledge is explained. If the reason that I know that I do not know that p consists in something like my knowing that q and that q entails that I do not know that p, then this last occurrence of “I” cannot be eliminated or replaced by a nonindexical in the explanation without assuring its failure. For my knowledge that q and that q entails that I do not know that p, unless the indexical is reintroduced in ascribing to me knowledge that I am Jeremy. What is to be explained in this case has nothing to do with action or mere belief. Thus, the purely theoretical explanation of my knowing that I do not know that p is essentially indexical independently of the well-known essential indexicality of explanations of action. Moreover, given that this is such a basic and general case insofar as no presuppositions are made about p, any epistemology that is unable to explain at least some such cases is inadequate.  

Given these preliminary remarks, none of which should be very controversial, the following argument is unproblematic. A minimally adequate epistemological theory must support explanations for a range of putative cases of epistemic merit. The success of some of the requisite explanations requires essential indexicals. Therefore, essentially indexical attitude ascriptions are necessary elements of a minimally adequate epistemological theory.

III. The Failure of Semantic Solutions

Returning now to the problem of the essential indexical as formulated above, it has been the tradition to avoid the specter of limited accessibility by way of the theory of meaning, in particular the theory of meaning for indexical attitude ascriptions. Such theories must explain the parts of the attitude ascriptions (the subject, the attitude, the content, and so on) and how they relate to one another. The traditional accounts of such attitude ascriptions as knowledge are propositional, broadly construed as describing an attitude relation between subjects and propositional contents. It has been argued that it is this account that gives rise to the problem. Thus, it is natural to suppose that modifications or alternatives to the propositional account might alleviate the problem. As anticipated, this is not the case. It is not the propositional view that is the source of the problem, nor does its resolution lie in the modifications or alternatives to that account. No modification can avoid limited accessibility and also support successful explanations in terms of indexicals. The alternatives, if they work as well as a propositional theory, have the same problematic consequence of limited accessibility, and they have no explanatory advantage with respect to the indexical attitude ascriptions.

A propositional theory is defined here as any theory that holds the following: attitude
ascriptions such as “I know that p” are to be understood as (meaning) the obtaining of certain relations between subjects and the propositional content p. These propositions are individuated by their composition in such a way that they may bear logical relations to one another. Under this extremely broad understanding of “the propositional theory,” many views are considered propositional that may not be propositional according to some more restricted definition. None of the arguments below depend on any more details about the propositional view, e.g., whether the propositions are Fregean or Russellian.

There are three general alternatives to the propositional view. First, it may be claimed that the contents of attitudes are in no manner individuated by their composition in such a way that they may bear logical relations to one another. This radical view is untenable since it makes explanation of inference impossible, and it will not be discussed further here. Another option is to accept that contents may be understood as propositions but that contents may be reduced to something less, namely properties. For every propositional analysis of a belief that p, for instance, there is a corresponding property of believing oneself to be in a world or state of affairs in which p is true. This is the theory proposed by Chisholm and Lewis (1979). Another option: it may be proposed that the propositional units individuated by their composition in such a way that they may bear logical relations to one another are substantially insufficient to describe content. The “third aspect theory” of the sort advocated by Perry (1979) and Haack (1995) holds that contents are propositional and something else besides. A related but distinct variant of this option is the “multiple relations theory” advocated by Pelczar (2007). Like the third aspect theory, the multiple relations theory holds that propositions are insufficient to make the requisite distinctions. However, on the multiple relations view, this is not because there is an additional component to the content, but because there are multiple possible relations to that content rather than a single relation for each attitude type.9

The part of the theory shared by Lewis (1979) and Chisholm (1981) is representative of the sort of theory that attempts to exceed the explanatory capacity of propositional theories with something less than propositions.

Rather than standardizing on propositions, I think we should standardize on properties. I want to make a case for these two theses: (1) When propositional objects will do, property objects will do. (2) Sometimes property objects will do and propositional objects won’t (Lewis 1979, p. 514).

On this view, attitude ascriptions should be understood as ascriptions of self-attributions of certain properties. For instance, belief will be understood as the self-attribute of a certain property about one’s actual environment so that x believes that Venus is larger than Mars, for instance, means that x attributes to himself the property of being in a possible world where Venus is larger than Mars.10 The property will in many cases be just the property that correlates to the proposition that would be ascribed by a propositional view. For every proposition there corresponds a property of being in a possible world where it is true that p. The advantage of Lewis’s theory lies in the fact that there are properties to which no unique proposition corresponds, such as the property of being in danger. According to the theory, indexical attitude ascriptions are ascriptions of self-attributions of properties to which no unique proposition corresponds. For instance, I believe I am in danger just in case I attribute to myself the property of being in danger. This is an advantage because it allows a distinction between the contents
ascribed indexically and the contents ascribed
with co-referring nonindexicals apparently
without engendering limited access to any of
the contents. The indexically ascribed content
is distinct from the nonindexically ascribed
content, since the properties self-attributed
are different in the two kinds of ascriptions.

Another way to modify the propositional
view is to keep the propositions but demote
them from the unit of content to a part of
content. The composition, logical relations,
and individuation thereby depend not only
on propositions but also upon some third
element. This type of view is appropriately
called the “third aspect theory” for this rea
son: the added explanatory capacity of this
type of modified view will depend on the
contribution of the third element to the mean
ing of the relevant attitude ascriptions.

Perry’s (1979) theory is a representative
third aspect theory, where the additional
factor is the way in which a proposition is
believed or known. According to Perry, all
propositions are accessible by anyone, but
not everyone can access those propositions
in the same ways. It is the ways in which
a belief may be held that are relevant to
determining the content of indexical belief
ascriptions, e.g., in the explanation of my
discovery that I am in danger. This means that
the way something is believed is relevant to
the meaning of a belief ascription. So Perry’s
modified propositional theory is that the ascription “x believes that p” is the ascription
of an attitude whose content is determined
both by the proposition p as well as by the
way in which x believes that proposition.
The content of indexical attitude ascriptions,
such as “I believe that I am in danger,” can
thereby be distinguished from the contents
of any co-referring nonindexical ascriptions,
such as “I believe that Jeremy is in danger.”

Moreover, those different contents may yet
share the same constituent proposition, differ-
ing only in the way the way that proposition
is believed. According to the third aspect
theory, unlike the unmodified theory, such
indexical attitude ascriptions do not limit
the accessibility of propositions. Although it
is true on this account that only I can believe
that proposition in that way when I come to
believe that I am in danger, others have access
to that proposition that I believe. It is just that
they do not have access to that proposition in
the same way that I do. In short, Perry pro-
poses that the contents of attitude ascriptions
are individuated in terms of the ways subjects
have attitudes toward propositions in addition
to the propositions themselves. The result is
a theory of content that allows successful
essentially indexical explanations, and yet
every proposition ascribed in the explanation
is accessible.1

The goal of these alternative semantic
theories is to work in essentially indexical
explanations while avoiding the consequence
of limited accessibility. The results of these
theories, however, do not actually reach that
goal. Neither type of the modified proposi-
tional theory can deliver successful indexical
explanations without limiting access to the
content ascribed in the explanation. Here,
“content” is just to be understood as whatever
it is that makes the difference in the
explanation of my act of fleeing, my belief
that I am in danger, coming to know that I do
not know p, etc. The modified propositional
theories either have the same consequence
of limited accessibility as the propositional
view or result in failed explanations. These
theories have no more explanatory capacity
than propositional theories.

The third aspect theory works in essen-
tially indexical explanations, and yet every
proposition ascribed in the explanation is ac-
cessible. Nevertheless, this is consistent with
it not being the case that the theory works in
essentially indexical explanations and every
content ascribed therein is accessible. This
is precisely because propositions are not all
there is to content on the third aspect theory.
The goal of avoiding limited access to content
may not be met on the third aspect theory, even if it is granted that no proposition is of limited accessibility.

The content ascribed in accordance with the third aspect theory must bear certain logical relations to other contents. For instance, it must be possible for any given content to enter into such relations as consistency and entailment with other contents. Moreover, the ascriptions themselves must bear the correct logical relations to one another in a given explanation. For instance, on pain of circumventing a successful explanation, the ascription that “I believe that Jeremy is in danger” needs to be nonequivalent to “I believe that I am in danger,” and the contents of the two attitudes ascribed must not be the same in the explanation of my discovery that I am in danger. If those ascriptions are not equivalent and their contents not the same, something must account for their difference in either the theory of content or other features of the content ascription, such as the identity of the subject, the type of attitude, etc. Now suppose the subject and type of attitude of two given attitude ascriptions, one indexical the other nonindexical, are stipulated to be the same; e.g., I am in fact Jeremy and my belief that Jeremy is in danger is the same type of attitude as my belief that I am in danger. If the propositions are the same, then what accounts for the ascription’s nonequivalence must be the third aspect. Thus, it is the third aspect that is the source of limited accessibility. What is limitedly accessible may be the proposition or the third aspect, but either way the result is that the complex content as a whole is limitedly accessible.

As an illustration, consider Perry’s “ways of believing” version of the third aspect theory. The theory must individuate attitudes in such a manner that the indexical ascriptions employed in an explanation have the right logical relations to each other. For example, there must be logical relations between the belief ascriptions (A) through (D) below so that (B) is consistent with the negation of (A) even if “I” and “X” co-refer, (B) is not equivalent to (D) where X is not Y, and so on.

(A) I believe, in the way I believe it, that I am in danger.
(B) X believes, in the way X believes it, that X is in danger.
(C) Y believes, in the way Y believes it, that Y is in danger.
(D) Y believes, in the way Y believes it, that X is in danger.

Among these relations is the logical truth that (A) is equivalent to (B) or it is not. If it is, then the explanation using (A) cannot succeed. This follows because in order for (A) and (B) to be equivalent, both the same proposition and way of believing that proposition must be ascribed in both (A) and (B). If either the ways or the propositions ascribed differ in a pair of such ascriptions, then the ascriptions cannot be equivalent. However, if both the same proposition and way are ascribed in (A) and (B), then my action and belief cannot be explained, since the success of the explanation requires distinguishing between my belief that X is in danger and my belief that I am in danger.

If (A) is not equivalent to (B), the content of the attitude ascribed in (A) must be of
limited accessibility. For given that (A) is not equivalent to (B), either the proposition ascribed in (A) is different from that ascribed in (B) or the ways of believing ascribed in (A) and (B) are different. *The difference maker will be what is required for the success of the explanation.* If (A) is not equivalent to (B), then either the proposition is essentially indexical or the way is essentially indexical in (A). If the proposition ascribed in (A) is essentially indexical, then access to that proposition is limited to x as in the original argument. Of course, Perry would deny that the proposition is limited accessible because he would have the proposition in (A) and (B) be the same proposition. Yet if the proposition is the same in (A) and (B), then the way that proposition is believed in (A) must be different from the way it is believed in (B).

Now no one can believe that I am in danger in exactly the same “I-way” that I do by Perry’s own admission. Since no nonindexical way of believing that I am in danger is the same as the indexical way, the complex content comprised of the proposition and the way it is believed ascribed in (A) cannot be accessed by anyone other than me. The result is that access to the content ascribed is limited. Since the ascriptions (A) and (B) are either equivalent or they are not, the third aspect theory fails to explain the case in a way that avoids limited accessibility.

Whatever ways of believing turn out to be, it remains true that the part of the content that is doing the explanatory work in the indexical explanations is the third aspect. Consequently, that third aspect must be essentially indexical and the resultant content limitedly accessible on pain of ruining the explanation. It is important to note that third aspect theories fail as a general strategy no matter how the third aspect is cashed out. For in the general argument against the third aspect theory, no assumptions are made about the nature of the third aspect other than that such are additional factors that together with propositions determine the content ascribed in a given explanation. The dilemma for the theory turns only on the fact that X and Y can believe the same proposition different ways and X and Y can believe different propositions in some same way. The inability of third aspect theories to give successful indexical explanations without limited accessibility arises from the mere assumption that X and Y can have the same attitude to the same proposition and yet differ with regard to the third aspect and thus differ with regard to the complex content ascribed. That is at bare minimum what a third aspect theory entails. Otherwise it would not be a modified propositional theory; it would be an ordinary propositional theory. Thus, despite differences in the details of various third aspect theories, my argument serves as an argument against every third aspect theory.¹⁴

What of the other alternative? It should first be noted that indexical ascriptions are not replaceable by nonindexical ascriptions on the Chisholm-Lewis theory. (Rather, it is the other way around.) For to explain my discovery that I am in danger, this theory ascribes to me a self-attribution of the property of being in danger. However, any nonindexical ascription, in terms of nonindexical α will ascribe to me the self-attribution of *being in a world where* α is in danger. The property of being in a world where α is in danger and the property of being in danger are clearly different properties; so they cannot be the same content. Thus, this type of modified theory would presumably grant that there is no reduction of indexical to nonindexical but would nonetheless suggest that access to the content of indexical ascriptions is not limited as it is on the propositional view.

The problem with the theory of Chisholm and Lewis arises from the fact that the property that I self-attribute, being in danger, cannot be all there is to the content of my discovery that I am in danger. For if it were, then the “content” of my belief would not be
what explains my action, since it would be no different from the content of anyone else’s belief that they are in danger. For the property of being in danger is the same for me as it is for you even though there is a difference between our respective self-attributions of that property. The content is clearly different: when you know that you are in danger, you know something different from what I know when I know I am in danger. (I should mention that this claim is the source of my objection to McGinn’s theory.) The content therefore consists not merely of the property but the self-attribution of the property. Without the self-attribution, there is no content. Thus, on the Chisholm-Lewis theory, the content ascribed depends not only on the property but also on who makes the self-attribution of the property. Yet that makes the limited accessibility of the content very obvious, since each one’s self-attributions are different from those of everyone else. Though you and I may both self-attribute the same property, this does not mean you and I know the same thing when I discover I am in danger and you discover you are in danger. Suppose I attribute danger to myself and you attribute danger to yourself. Our self-attributions are different because we are different. No one can self-attribute danger to me but me. Thus, the content ascribed in the indexical explanation of my discovery that I am in danger cannot be accessed by anyone other than me. Access to content on the Chisholm-Lewis view is limited because content is self-attribution of properties.

Interestingly enough, the Chisholm-Lewis theory entails that all contents, both indexically and nonindexically ascribed contents, are of limited accessibility. If all attitudes are self-attributions of properties, not just the indexically ascribed attitudes, then the identity of every content depends on who is self-ascribing whatever property. Consider the difference between the ascription “I attribute to myself the property of being in a world where p is true” and “I attribute to Jeremy the property of being in a world where p is true” and “Jeremy attributes to me the property of being in a world where p is true.” The consequence is that all, not just some, contents are limited accessible. So the Chisholm-Lewis theory not only fails to avoid limited accessibility but entails global limited accessibility. These extremes aside, the problem is really the same for all the theories: the only way to succeed in an indexical explanation is to limit access to the contents ascribed in some way or other. The propositional view is not the source of limited accessibility nor is any other semantic view. The source of limited accessibility is the success of essentially indexical explanations.

IV. Epistemological Implications of Limited Access

The argument up to this point has been in the service of the thesis that limited accessibility is an unavoidable consequence of a successful epistemological theory. What has just been shown is that no amount of maneuvering in the theory of meaning can avoid the situation that faces the propositional view, namely, that explanatory success in terms of essential indexicals requires limited accessibility. In the section before it was shown that epistemology must support just that type of explanatory success. Thus, limited accessibility must be accepted by an adequate epistemological theory. In this section, some of the important consequences of this acceptance are explored.

Limited accessibility appears to conflict with the assumptions, first, that omniscience is possible, and second, that knowledge and epistemic merit generally is always in principle publicly defensible. These assumptions have a common source in the idea of epistemic sharability or publicity: the idea that epistemic merit is open to public access. What remains to be shown is how this idea can be made compatible with limited acces-
sibility, and this requires explaining in more
detail wherein the potential conflict lies.

The prima facie possibility of omniscience
arises from the idea that knowledge is univer-
sally sharable. If it is assumed that anyone
might know what is known by anyone else
(or that knowledge is “universally sharable”),
then it appears to be possible that there is
an omniscient being who knows everything
known by any other. However, if there is at
least some content that is of limited acces-
sibility, then omniscience is impossible.

Some limited accessible contents, such
as my knowledge that I do not know that
p, have been determined to be not the same
as any contents possible for any individual
other than me. In any case, an omniscient
being cannot know that it does not know, for
that is straightforwardly inconsistent with
omniscience. Moreover, knowledge that
Jeremy does not know that p, to which some
being other than me might have access, is not
the same as what I know when I know that
I do not know that p. My knowledge about
my own lack of knowledge is in principle
inaccessible and thus incompatible with the
possibility of an omniscient being. Assume-
ing that I am not omniscient and there are
at least two individual knowers, limited ac-
cessibility is inconsistent with omniscience.
In short, absent the assumption of solipsism,
omniscience is impossible.

This is not in itself problematic for, pro-
vided one has no theological reason to avoid
it, one can simply restrict the scope of knowl-
edge for omniscience to nonindexical knowl-
edge, noting that omniscience is not strictly
speaking to know everything. Nonetheless,
the possibility of unqualified omniscience
can never be assumed, though it often is in
epistemology.

The omniscient translator argument is,
roughly, an argument against the possibility
of massive error for a given set of coherent
beliefs from the possibility of an omniscient
being that translates the language in which
the beliefs are stated. If such an omniscient
translator is possible, and given that it must
correlate its true beliefs (by definition all
of its beliefs are true) with those of the
individual(s) whose language it is translat-
ing, then the beliefs reflected in the translated
language must be mostly true. Whether or
not this conclusion follows, which is itself
controversial, the argument clearly assumes
that unqualified omniscience is possible.
Thus, since omniscience is not possible, an
epistemological theory is not relieved of the
problematic possibility of massive error by
the omniscient translator argument.

The inconsistency of omniscience has been
noted by Grimm (1985), and the present
account develops the point in two different
ways. First, the meaning of the previous
arguments is that epistemology must accept
limited accessibility and not merely that it
may do so. Second, this shows that David-
son’s omniscient translator argument cannot
be used to prop up an epistemological theory
against the possibility of massive error. How-
ever, this does not rule out other arguments
against the possibility of massive error, and
thus the omniscient translator argument may
be simply given up or reformulated in such a
way that it does not clash with limited acces-
sibility. Of course, a reformulated, qualified,
nonindexical omniscient translator argument
would leave open the question of whether
massive error is possible in the realm of
limited accessibility. Thus, such a reformula-
tion could never really serve the purpose of
dispelling the possibility of massive error.

Having mentioned the omniscient transla-
tor, this is a good point at which to address
the worry that the present approach ignores
the well-accepted argument against private
language from Wittgenstein. The argument
against private language is against the pos-
sibility of language that refers to or concerns
only contents of limited accessibility on the
grounds that such a language would be as
unintelligible to its user as it would to those
who had no access to the contents to which the language refers, the reason being that such a language has no resources by which to adjudicate or correct its own usage. The important point to note is that such a private language makes reference to only or exclusively contents of limited accessibility. Thus, a private language entails limited access but limited access does not entail a private language. What has not been argued is that all contents are limited accessible nor has it been argued that such thoughts be expressed in a private language. In fact, it is clear that the previous arguments apply only to public languages that contain pure indexicals. The proposal is that explanations in such a public language entail that there are some contents of limited accessibility and not that all contents are of limited accessibility. None of these claims entail the possibility of a private language. Another way to put the point is that epistemology must accept some private knowledge, understood as conditionally unknowable contents, as has been argued; but this does not require that the contents are expressible only in a private language. So the point is actually consistent with the anti-private language conclusion, though not with the universal sharability or the possibility of omniscience.

The other potential conflict with limited accessibility applies more directly to standard epistemological theories. A better take on the public nature of epistemic merit does not require universal sharability, but it does require defensibility in the sense that the conditions necessary for knowledge (justified belief, or other form of epistemic merit) include the ability to defend what one knows against interpersonal objections. A theory such as Lehrer’s (2000) makes explicit reference to such a condition: one necessary condition of personal justification is that possible (interpersonal) objections can be answered. This kind of principle is very plausible, but answering interpersonal objections requires the sharability of content insofar as an objection by one person to another’s belief requires that the objection have as its target the content of that same belief. Given that defensibility entails sharability, the condition that justification and/or knowledge requires defensibility appears to be inconsistent with the possibility of limited accessible knowledge and justified belief. Since sharability is just the denial of limited accessibility, it appears that epistemological theories must, on pain of inconsistency, reject defensibility and the intuitions about the public nature of epistemic merit that underlie it.

V. A Plausible Epistemological Account of Limited Accessibility

It should be noted here that theories which feature the role of higher-order essentially indexical attitude ascriptions have a particularly pressing problem on the supposition that defensibility is inconsistent with limited accessibility. Such theoretical features are commonplace in both foundationalist and coherentist theories. Consider another condition on Lehrer’s theory according to which my justified acceptance that p requires my accepting that I am trustworthy in what I accept. This last “trustworthiness” acceptance or keystone acceptance on Lehrer’s coherence theory is clearly of limited accessibility. The explanation of my being justified will fail if I accept only that Jeremy is trustworthy in what he accepts. Thus, the result is that access to keystone acceptances is limited in such a way that threatens to prevent defensibility. An analogous argument can be made against BonJour’s (2003) foundationalist theory of justification, according to which justification ultimately depends on basic beliefs about one’s experiences. These beliefs are essentially indexical, since my belief that Jeremy is having some particular experience cannot do the explanatory work of my belief that I am having some particular experience. As in Lehrer’s theory, the theoretically important
contents are of limited accessibility in such a way that appears to threaten defensibility. Given that these theories also endorse defensibility conditions for these crucial higher-order attitudes, skepticism cannot be avoided unless there is some way to avoid the conflict between defensibility and limited accessibility.

The tension between limited access and defensibility is important but not fatal. To begin with, my argument that defensibility entails sharability of the target content may be incorrect. If defensibility does not require sharability, then there is no conflict. Yet even if defensibility does require sharability as has been argued here, the tension may be resolved by showing that interpersonal objections to contents of limited accessibility are impossible. For defensibility of knowledge is inconsistent with knowledge of limited accessibility only if there are interpersonal objections to contents of limited accessible knowledge.

Suppose I believe that I am in danger and Jones objects because he believes me to be in the audience of a dramatic reenacting of a famous assassination. Jones objects, “You, Jeremy, are not in danger.” His objection that Jeremy, the man he is addressing with “you,” etc., is not in danger appears to contradict or at the very least bear an immediate logical relation to my belief that I am in danger. This is not so. By itself, my belief that I am in danger bears no logical relation to, not even inconsistency with, his belief that Jeremy is not in danger. Such a logical connection requires a bridge in the form of my belief that I am Jeremy or my belief that I am the person being addressed by you, each of which is of limited accessibility. The interpersonal objection that arises from Jones’s belief that Jeremy is not in danger does not logically connect with a target that is of limited accessibility. It is at most an objection to my possible belief that Jeremy is in danger, which is not the same as my belief that I am in danger. It is not an objection to my limitedly accessible belief.

In order for that objection to connect with my belief that I am in danger, it would have to be “internalized” by means of a bridge belief that I am Jeremy and cease thereby to be interpersonal by becoming intrapersonal. Strictly speaking you cannot pose an objection to some of my beliefs because you are not me. The bridge principle “I believe that I am α” is both necessary for an objection to a content of limited accessibility and itself of limited accessibility. In an extreme case, such as total amnesia, in which I have no bridge beliefs, there are no interpersonal objections to my beliefs about myself. In an ordinary case, of course I have many bridging beliefs of the form I believe that I am α. Thus, in a normal case I have a number of sharable beliefs to which there are a number of interpersonal objections, and I have a number of beliefs that are of limited accessibility to which there are no interpersonal objections but to which I have a number of internalized intrapersonal objections.

If there are no interpersonal objections to limited accessible contents, there is no conflict between defensibility and limited accessibility. It may be true both that epistemic justification, for instance, requires defensibility and that there are justified beliefs which are limitedly accessible. It may be also granted that to defend against objections is to have opposing attitudes toward a sharable content. So long as there are no interpersonal objections, which is assured in the cases of limited accessibility, defensibility and limited accessibility remain compatible.

These remarks show that the conflict between limited accessibility and epistemic publicity is not insurmountable. In the case of defensibility, the conflict is only apparent. In the case of unqualified omniscience, nothing of epistemological importance is given up by admitting its impossibility.

To conclude, an epistemological theory can plausibly accept limited accessibility by
rejecting the possibility of omniscience and by explaining away the apparent conflict with its defensibility conditions. This is a positive result, since limited accessibility must be accepted in any case. When limited accessibility is not shoved under the rug by sophisticated maneuvers in the philosophy of mind and language but is addressed as a fundamental epistemological issue in its own right, this important solution to the problem of essential indexicals is revealed.

NOTES

1. The distinction between pure indexicals and demonstratives follows Kaplan (1989), and the distinction between indexicals and quasi-indexicals originates from Castaneda (1966).

2. Of course the belief that Jeremy is in danger would work if I also know that I am Jeremy. Yet, as noted above, that is to reintroduce the indexical. The indexical “I” cannot be eliminated from the explanation of the action described above without failing as an explanation.

3. The irreducibility thesis holds for other indexicals: essential indexical uses of the first person “I” are also neither reducible to demonstratives such as “this” nor other indexicals such as the second person “you.” I can believe that this man (pointing at myself in a mirror) is in danger without believing that I am. For I may fail to believe that I am that man. As for the second person, consider a case where another individual, Smith, uses “you” to refer to me when tells me “you are in danger.” I might believe that the person to whom “you” refers in Smith’s assertion “you are in danger” is in danger without believing that I am, for I may fail to believe that I am the referent of your “you.” Thus, there is no reduction to these other indexicals.

4. One might interpret McGinn’s (1983) EA thesis to entail that limited accessibility does not follow from essential indexicality. According to the EA thesis:

$$\exists m \forall x (x \text{ is presented with } x \text{ in } m \land \neg \exists y (y \text{ is presented with } x \text{ in } m \land y \neq x))$$

It’s contrast with the corresponding AE thesis is in the order of the two quantifiers with widest scope. McGinn’s case for the EA thesis might be used to argue that the same thought content is involved in every case where “I believe I am in danger” is true, even for different individuals. This cannot be correct, since content varies for different individuals referred to. Although it may be granted to McGinn that the sense of “I” is constant (though it is more proper to say that it is linguistic meaning that is constant), its reference clearly varies among different individuals. Difference of reference is surely sufficient, if not necessary, for a difference in content. Since the content of others’ beliefs expressible as “I believe that I am in danger” are not about me but about them, it is not the same content of my thought, which is about me.

5. This account of the argument was compiled from Castaneda (1966), Perry (1979), and Lewis (1979).

6. Limited access is the prevention of a content from being the content of attitudes held by just anyone. In the example, the content of my belief that I am in danger is limitedly accessible in the sense that it is impossible for anyone other than me to have the same attitudinal relations toward that content that I have.

7. Burge (1998) is an exception.

8. If the analysis of an important kind of wisdom as knowing that one does not know is correct, then the argument just given suggests that wisdom is indexical even if, in general, knowledge is not.
9. An anonymous reviewer deserves recognition for pointing out the multiple relations theory as a possible alternative. Although the multiple relations theory is somewhat similar to the third aspect theory, the two are distinct. Propositions could be accepted as the proper contents of belief while beliefs in the same proposition can be distinguished according to which among different possible belief relations is had to that content rather than by some third aspect of the content. That is, to adequately describe a given attitude requires not just an identification of the content, subject, and type of attitude, but an identification of one of a number of multiple relations possible for that type of attitude. Accordingly, there is no single relation that is belief but a set of different but similar relations: belief 1, belief 2, etc. Although there may be clear advantages to the multiple relations view on other fronts, it is argued below that it offers no special advantage on the issue of limited access. In the case of the third aspect theory, there will be some complex content consisting of the proposition plus the third aspect that is of limited accessibility. In the case of the multiple relations theory, there will be some contents that are of limited accessibility by means of at least some of the multiple relations that might constitute a given type of attitude. Whether it comes from supplementing propositions with additional content or with additional relations, the result in either case is limited accessibility.

10. It is important to be clear here about what is being ascribed by whom so the locution “attribution” is used here to refer to the subject’s self-ascriptions of properties to avoid ambiguity. Without this artificial device, what Lewis is claiming is that when we ascribe an attitude such as belief, we are actually ascribing a self-ascribed property to the subject: we ascribe that he ascribes to himself the property that so and so.

11. One might reasonably maintain that Perry’s view is ambiguous between the multiple relations view and the third aspect view. That is, “ways of believing” might be interpreted as indicating different belief relations that do not make for a difference in content, however broadly construed. Given just how broadly “content” is defined here, the third aspect theory is apparently the correct interpretation of at least the classic Perry (1979). However, to labor over this point of interpretation would be an unnecessary distraction from the argument that neither strategy avoids limited accessibility.

12. On a multiple relations theory such as Pelczar’s, it is denied that the same attitudinal relation obtains in my belief that Jeremy is in danger and my belief that I am in danger. So as the aforementioned anonymous reviewer suggests, the advocate of this view can reject the supposition that the only difference is a difference of content. However, even if this is granted, a dilemma remains for the multiple relations theory: the argument against the third aspect theory will apply to the multiple relations theory for a given belief relation as long as that belief relation is held constant throughout; e.g., if it is possible that my belief that Jeremy is in danger instantiates the same belief relation as my belief that I am in danger and yet these are different beliefs. Of course the advocate of the multiple relations strategy can deny that possibility, just as Pelczar (2007, p. 15) apparently does, but in so doing he will admit limited accessibility, since to deny that is it is possible for a given individual to have some given attitudinal relation to a given content is just to accept limited accessibility as defined here. In that case the multiple relations view is consistent with the central claim that limited accessibility cannot be avoided.

13. Likewise for the multiple relations theory: it is the limited obtainment of certain attitudinal relations that is the source of limited accessibility. Although a proposition can be accessed by anyone by some relation or other, it cannot be accessed by everyone by means of the same relation. So far as this point is concerned, there may be no conflict between the multiple relations view and actual instances of limited accessibility.

14. Another example is Haack’s (1997) third aspect theory. It is interesting that she proposes the theory as a solution to Sellars’s dilemma in the context of her general epistemological theory, apparently independently of the problem of essential indexicals.

15. The anti-private language argument is clearly more pressing for the Chisholm-Lewis theory.
16. For reasons that need not be discussed here, Lehrer prefers to analyze knowledge in terms of justified acceptances rather than mere beliefs. Nothing hangs on the distinction from the point of view of limited access, since acceptances are just the sort of attitude that might be ascribed in terms of essential indexicals.

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