In Defense of *De Se* Content

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Introduction

There is currently disagreement about whether the phenomenon of first-person, or *de se*, thought motivates a move towards special kinds of contents. Some take the conclusion that traditional propositions are unable to serve as the content of *de se* belief to be old news, successfully argued for in a number of influential works several decades ago.[1] Recently, some philosophers have challenged the view that there exist uniquely *de se* contents, claiming that most of the philosophical community has been under the grip of an attractive but unmotivated myth.[2] At the very least, this latter group has brought into question the arguments in favor of positing special kinds of content for *de se* belief; I think they have successfully shown that these arguments are not as conclusive, or fully articulated, as many have taken them to be. In this paper I will address these challenges directly and I will present and defend an argument for the conclusion that the phenomenon of *de se* thought does indeed motivate the move to a special kind of content, content that is uniquely *de se*.

First, I characterize a notion of *de se* belief that is neutral with respect to friends and foes of uniquely *de se* content. I then argue for a determination thesis relating *de se* belief to belief content: that there is no difference in *de se* belief without a difference in belief content. I argue that various proposals for rejecting this determination thesis are unsuccessful. In the last part of the paper, I employ this determination thesis to argue for the existence of a type of belief content that is uniquely *de se*.

1. Belief Content Determines *De Se* Belief

I hope to understand the notion of *de se* belief in a way that is neutral with respect to whether there is anything distinctive or philosophically special about the phenomenon of *de se* belief. Let us say that a subject has a *de se* belief just in case she sincerely expresses,

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[1] See, for example, Lewis (1979) and Chisholm (1981).
[2] See, for example, Magidor (forthcoming) and Cappelen and Dever (2013).

or is disposed to sincerely express, her belief using a first-person pronoun. The beliefs that I would express with the utterance "I am hungry" or "My pants are on fire" are paradigm examples of *de se* beliefs.[3] Even the *de se* skeptic, one who denies that there is anything special, distinctive, or uniquely problematic about *de se* attitudes will accept the existence of *de se* beliefs so characterized; she will just go on to maintain that there is nothing distinctive or uniquely problematic about such beliefs. Such beliefs, the skeptic maintains, can be explained in terms of contents that are not different from contents that characterize other kinds of beliefs that we express without using a first-person pronoun.

The thesis I wish to argue for is the following:

Content Determines *De Se* Belief (CDDS): Necessarily, for any subjects, S and T, if S and T agree with respect to the content of their beliefs, then they have the same *de se* beliefs.

The motto associated with the above determination thesis is "No difference in *de se* belief without a difference in content". "*De se* belief", as it appears in CDDS, is to be understood in the minimal and neutral sense described in the previous paragraph. Also, I take the above formulation to be neutral with respect to a number of views concerning the nature of belief contents. First, I take it to be neutral with respect to what contents are: *i.e.* sets of possible worlds, structured propositions, or sentences in a language of thought. Also, it does not presuppose that there is a unique content associated with each belief. It may be that there are a number of contents that characterize a given *de se* belief. For one who takes sets of possible worlds to fully characterize the content of belief, the above thesis can be understood as claiming that there is no difference in *de se* belief between subjects S and T without a difference between the set of worlds that characterize S's beliefs and the set of worlds that characterize T's beliefs. For one who takes structured propositions to fully characterize the content of belief, the above thesis can be understood as claiming that there

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[3] By appealing to sincere expressions and dispositions to express sentences containing first-person pronouns, I don't intend to give strict necessary and sufficient conditions for the notion of *de se* belief that I am characterizing. It is well-known that dispositional analyses of belief are subject to counterexample. Hopefully, the appeal to sincere expressions of, and dispositions to express, sentences containing first-person pronouns succeeds in highlighting a class of beliefs that is both intuitive and theoretically neutral.

is no difference in *de se* belief without a difference in the structured propositions that each subject believes.

CDDS makes use of the notion of *same* de se *belief*. What is it for a subject to have the same *de se* belief as another subject? What is it for them to have different *de se* beliefs? Let us say, roughly, that subject S has the same *de se* belief as subject T just in case S and T both have *de se* beliefs and S is disposed to express this belief using a sentence with the same Kaplanian character as the sentence that T is disposed to assert in expressing her belief. Two subjects have different *de se* beliefs just in case they are not disposed to utter sentences with the same Kaplanian character. Suppose Albert has a *de se* belief that he is disposed to express by uttering 'I am in the basement'. For Boris to have the same *de se* belief as Albert is for Boris to have a belief that he is disposed to express by uttering 'I am in the basement'. I do not intend to take any sides in helping myself the notion of 'same *de se* belief'. Given that I have characterized the notion of *de se* belief in a way that ought to be amenable to the *de se* skeptic, the notion of two subjects having the same *de se* belief ought to also be amenable to the *de se* skeptic. The *de se* skeptic (as well as others) may object to my labelling of such beliefs as 'the same' given that they have different truth-conditions or because of intuitions regarding *what is said* by my utterance of 'I am hungry' and *what is said* by your utterance of 'I am hungry', but for present purposes allow me to stipulate the meaning of 'same *de se* belief' without any additional commitment to what makes two beliefs the same.

My argument for CDDS can be summarized as follows: (1) Suppose we have two subjects with different *de se* beliefs. (2) Then they will act differently or be disposed to act differently. (3) Appeal to difference in content is essential to explain the difference in action or disposition to act differently. (4) Therefore there is a difference in content between the two subjects. So difference in *de se* belief entails a difference in content.

Regarding (1), I've explained above what it is for two subjects to have different *de se* beliefs. As I've defined it, all parties to the debate can grant the existence of *de se* beliefs, so construed, and grant the existence of cases where two subjects have different *de se* beliefs. Why accept statement (2): that two subjects with different *de se* beliefs will act differently or be disposed to act differently? To a large extent, this follows from what it is for the two subjects to have different *de se* beliefs. In the simplest case, one subject will utter, or be disposed to produce an utterance of, a sentence of the form "I am F" and the other will

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utter, or be disposed to produce an utterance of, a sentence of the form "I am not F". Producing or being disposed to produce different sentence-types is in itself a difference in action or difference in disposition to act. It seems plausible that producing utterances of different sentence-types involves performing actions of different action-types. Of course, there may be additional differences in action in light of the difference in *de se* belief. If one has a *de se* belief that he would express by saying "My pants are on fire" and the other has a different *de se* belief, one that she would express by saying "My pants are not on fire" the difference in their respective actions will presumably not be limited to a difference in speech acts.

Statement (3) of the argument, that appeal to difference in content is essential to explain the difference in action or disposition to act differently, is the one that requires the most defense and much of the remainder of the paper will be arguing for it.

In order to evaluate the argument it will be helpful to focus on an example involving two subjects with different *de se* beliefs. Let us consider a case in which David's pants catch fire and Susan, who is standing nearby, sees it happen. Suppose David forms a belief that he expresses by saying "My pants are on fire" and Susan, upon observing David and hearing his utterance, forms a belief that she expresses by saying "Your pants are on fire". Also suppose that Susan is not disposed to produce an utterance of "My pants are on fire". As I've defined it, David and Susan fail to have the same *de se* beliefs: David expresses his belief by producing an utterance of "My pants are on fire" but Susan is not disposed to produce this utterance. In the case described, it seems clear that the differences in actions between Susan and David will go well beyond merely producing different utterances. David will stop, drop, and roll, and Susan will run to get the fire extinguisher. What explains the difference in action? If CDDS is violated in this case, and the content of Susan's belief is the same as the content of David's belief, then *there must be some other relevant difference* that explains the difference in action between the subjects. What I will argue for in the next three sections of the paper is that there are no plausible candidates for the explanation of the difference in action other than differences in content between the agents.

2. Difference in Available Action

In order to reject statement (3), one must argue that appeal to content is not essential in explaining the difference in action between two subjects with different *de se* beliefs.

Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever argue exactly this in chapter 3 of their 2013 book *The Inessential Indexical*. They consider cases similar to the one described above involving David and Susan and they claim that such cases fail to motivate positing a difference in content between the subjects. Although Cappelen and Dever don't explicitly state their claim in these terms, I think this follows from claims that they do explicitly make. They argue that explanations of actions need not involve an indexical or first-personal element. Considering cases like the one involving David and Susan, they say "it is not necessary for an indexical element to enter into the rationalization" (p.37). They claim that an adequate explanation of difference in action can be given that is "entirely third-person" (p.37). As we will see, the third-person beliefs and desires that enter into the explanation of differences in action between two subjects are believed and desired *by both subjects*. So differences in action can be explained without positing differences in belief content. Cappelen and Dever agree that there is some relevant difference that explains the difference in action between David and Susan; they just deny that it is a difference at the level of content. They claim that the difference in action is adequately explained in terms of *difference in actions that are available to the two subjects*. On their proposed account, actions can be explained by non-*de se* beliefs and desires plus facts about what actions are available to the agents. On their proposal, a combination of non-*de se* beliefs, desires and intentions give rise to a bunch of "inputs" and if these action inputs match one of the agent's available actions, the agent performs the action. For example, if I believe that there is a beer in the fridge and I desire a beer, this belief-desire complex will give rise to the input action of *opening the fridge and getting a beer*. Cappelen and Dever put it as follows:

> According to our alternative picture, the belief-desire-obligation-intention sets produce a bunch of inputs…Those inputs then hit the "action center," which is a big switchboard with a bunch of available actions. If an input matches an available action on the switchboard, an action results (p.51).

So if opening the fridge and getting a beer is one of my available actions, then there will be the appropriate match between input and available action and I will perform the action of opening the fridge and getting a beer.

In cases similar to the one involving David and Susan, Cappelen and Dever consider two alternative explanations of the action performed: a *Personal Action Rationalization* and an *Impersonal Action Rationalization*. Adapting these rationalizations to the case of David and Susan, we get the following two candidate explanations for the action *that David stops, drops and rolls*:

Personal Action Rationalization

Belief: David's pants are on fire

Belief: I am David

Belief: My pants are on fire

Desire: That I put out the fire

Belief: If I stop, drop and roll, I will put out the fire.

Action: I stop, drop and roll.

Impersonal Action Rationalization

Belief: David's pants are on fire.

Desire: That David puts out the fire.

Belief: If David stops, drops and rolls, he will put out the fire.

Action: David stops, drops and rolls.

Note that although David and Susan count as having different *de se* beliefs on my way of construing *de se* beliefs, the *Impersonal Action Rationalization* provides an explanation of David's action that does not appeal to a difference in belief content between David and Susan. Both David and Susan, let us suppose, believe that David's pants are on fire, both David and Susan desire that David puts out the fire, and both believe the conditional claim that if David stops, drops and rolls, he will put out the fire. And so if the *Impersonal Action Rationalization* does provide a successful explanation of David's action, then it seems that it is false that differences in content are essential in order to explain the difference in action, since both David and Susan have the beliefs and desires appealed to in the explanation. The explanation in difference in action is given not by a difference at the level of content, but rather by a difference in available action.

Cappelen and Dever argue that there are no good arguments to the effect that the *Impersonal Action Rationalization* is incomplete. They claim that both David and Susan have the beliefs and desires mentioned in the *Impersonal Action Rationalization* but only David has the action *that David stops, drops and rolls* as one of his available actions. The action *that David stops, drops and rolls* is not one of Susan's available actions and so even though her belief-desire-intention complex may produce the same input as David's in virtue of having the same beliefs, desires, and intentions, the fact that the action *that David stops, drops and rolls* is not one of her available actions explains why David performs the action and she does not.

But the appeal to difference in available action in order to explain difference in action performed is unsuccessful. This can be seen by considering a scenario in which the same actions are available to both subjects. Suppose that, unbeknownst to her, Susan has magical powers and is able to cast a spell that will result in the action *that David stops, drops and rolls*. Or perhaps, unbeknownst to her, her neurons are connected (perhaps wirelessly) to David's motor cortex so that she is able to perform the action *that David stops, drops and rolls*. Having the same impersonal beliefs and desires as David, Susan's belief-desire-obligation-intention set produces the same input action as David's belief-desire-obligation set: *that David stops, drops and rolls*. Furthermore, this action matches one of Susan's available actions: *that David stops, drops and rolls*. But Susan does not perform this action. The action switchboard appears to have malfunctioned.[4]

Why did the action switchboard malfunction? The answer seems obvious: Susan is unaware of her ability to perform the action *that David stop, drop and roll*; she fails to know that the action *that David stops, drops and rolls* is one of *her* available actions. Cappelen and Dever explicitly deny that their model of action requires that the agent has belief or knowledge of one's available actions. They write "It is not necessary that the agent believes

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[4] Could the defender of Cappelen and Dever's account respond by insisting that in such a case Susan *would* perform the action *that David stops, drops and rolls* despite being ignorant that such an action is available to her? This response is implausible. What would be the explanation for why Susan performed the action despite what I think is a strong intuition that she would not? The explanation would presumably follow from a general principle governing actions such as: if (1) an agent S believes state of affairs P obtains, (2) S desires that not-P obtains, (3) S believes that if action A is performed, not-P will obtain, and (4) action A is available to S, then S will perform A. But this principle is false and one does not need to look far to find (actual) counterexamples: we stand in front of a locked classroom waiting for someone to use the key to unlock it. Unbeknownst to me, I have the key in my pocket. So insisting that Susan would perform the available action despite her ignorance of its availability seems to presuppose a demonstrably false principle governing action. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this response on behalf of the defender of Cappelen and Dever's account.

or knows that [the available actions] are within actionable reach" (Cappelen and Dever, p.51). It is clear why they deny that such belief or knowledge is necessary for action given their commitment to non-indexical explanation of action: beliefs about what actions one has available are indexical beliefs: Susan would express it by saying "*I am able to perform the action that David stops, drops and rolls*" or, less naturally, "*That David stops, drops and rolls is one of my available actions*". So the explanation of why David and Susan act differently cannot be given merely in terms of the fact that David and Susan have the same beliefs and desires plus the fact that different actions are available to them. They must also have *beliefs about what actions are available to them* and this is a difference at the level of belief content; a difference that I am doubtful can be characterized entirely in third-personal terms. [5]

I conclude that Cappelen and Dever fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of the difference in action between David and Susan without appealing to differences in content. Mere difference in available actions between David and Susan cannot explain why they behave differently since even if they had the same available action, they would still behave differently. This suggests that the difference in their behavior is due to a difference in *what they believe*, rather than a difference in features external to content, such as what actions are available to them. So Cappelen and Dever fail to demonstrate the falsity of statement (3): that appeal to difference in content is essential to explain the difference in action or disposition to act differently.

3. Difference in Perspective

Unlike Cappelen and Dever, Robert Stalnaker acknowledges that there is a special problem associated with self-locating or *de se* attitudes.[6] However he rejects the determination thesis that I am arguing for: that *de se* beliefs are determined by belief content; that there is no difference in *de se* beliefs without a difference in belief content. In footnote 4 of his "Modeling a Perspective on the World" he states, "The main point I will be arguing for is more controversial: the distinctive character of self-locating attitudes does not imply that

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[5] See Ninan (2016, p.105-107) for a different response to Cappelen and Dever's account. Ninan's response offers an equally successful strategy for defending my argument for CDDS against the challenge posed by Cappelen and Dever's account.
[6] Stalnaker (2016, p.122, fn.4).

there is a distinctive kind of self-locating *content."[7]* In this paper, Stalnaker considers a case in which Albert is in the kitchen and Boris is in the basement and there is no self-locating ignorance: both know where they themselves are and where the other is. Later he writes:

> But being self-locating…is not a feature of a proposition believed. Even in cases, such as the case of Boris and Albert, where there is no self-locating ignorance, and so Boris's self-locating beliefs are exactly the singular propositions about himself that he believes, those same propositions are also believed by Albert, but they are not self-locating for him (Stalnaker 2016, p.133).

If being *de se* is not a feature of a proposition believed, what is it a feature of? How would Stalnaker explain a difference in *de se* belief without appealing to a difference in content? In Stalnaker's case involving Albert and Boris, they have different *de se* beliefs, in the sense that I have defined, since Albert is disposed to produce an utterance of "I am in the kitchen" and Boris is not. However Stalnaker grants that Albert can believe the same propositions that Boris believes, and they can be self-locating for Boris, but they can fail to be self-locating for Albert. Suppose that we are looking for an explanation of why Boris utters "I am in the basement" and Albert does not, or why Boris moves to unload the washing machine located in the basement and Albert moves to load the dishwasher located in the kitchen. It seems that the explanation cannot appeal to differences in the content of belief since, by supposition, there are none. So what is the relevant difference that explains the difference in action? Stalnaker's answer seems to be that the difference is in how the subjects are situated. In one case the set of propositions is believed by *Boris in the basement at 2pm* and in the other case the set of propositions is believed by *Albert in the kitchen at 2pm*. This difference in 'situatedness' of the subjects explains why believing the set is self-locating for one and not for the other.

   In *Our Knowledge of the Internal World*, Stalnaker outlines an account of *de se* belief in terms of *belief states*. A belief state, as Stalnaker understands it, is modelled by an ordered pair consisting of a *base world* and a *belief set*. A base world is a centered world representing the subject's actual situation. A belief set is comprised of a set of worlds compatible with what the subject believes. So whereas Albert and Boris may have the same propositions comprising their belief set, their belief states will differ in virtue of being

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[7] Stalnaker (2016, p.2, fn. 4), his emphasis.

comprised of different base worlds. Boris's belief state will contain the base world, a centered world represented by the individual, time, world triple, <Boris, 2pm, @> and Albert's belief state will contain the base world represented by the triple <Albert, 2pm, @>. So I suppose that the explanation why the same propositions believed can be *de se* for Boris and not *de se* for Albert is that Boris and Albert have different belief states. They have different *de se* beliefs, not because they believe different propositions, but rather because their belief states are composed of distinct base worlds representing their respective situations.[8]

I see two difficulties with this account. These difficulties can be brought out by considering an argument that Clas Weber (2014) gives to this account and Stalnaker's reply to it. Weber argues against "the proposal to treat self-location as a feature of the believer's relation to the content of the belief, rather than as a feature of the content itself" (Stalnaker

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[8] Although Stalnaker explicitly denies the thesis that content determines *de se* belief: Albert and Boris can be alike with respect to the content of their beliefs yet have different de se attitudes, it is difficult to see how to reconcile these claims with the details of Stalnaker's account. In several papers, Stalnaker construes a doxastic accessibility relation as a relation obtaining between the (centered) base world and a set of centered words: "The centers of the centered-worlds in second term of the relation represent the person that person takes herself to be in a world that is compatible with the way she takes the world to be, and the time in that world that she takes it to be" (Stalnaker 2016, p.132). But this suggests that the belief set modelling Boris's belief will differ from the belief set modelling Albert's belief. After all, Boris takes himself to be in the basement and so the worlds in his belief set will be centered on an individual in the basement, and Albert takes himself to be in the kitchen and so the worlds in his belief set will be centered on an individual in the kitchen. But curiously Stalnaker does not take this centered representation to comprise the content of Boris's and Albert's respective beliefs. If he did, then Albert and Boris would have different belief contents merely in virtue of Albert believing he is in the kitchen and Boris believing he is in the basement. If these centered worlds representations are part of the content of belief and Boris and Albert differ with respect to what centered worlds comprise their belief sets, then Stalnaker's view is straight-forwardly compatible with CDDS. But this seems to conflict with Stalnaker's claim at the outset of his 2016 paper "The main point I will be arguing for is more controversial: that the distinctive character of self-locating attitudes does not imply that there is a distinctive kind of self-locating content" (Stalnaker 2016, p.122, fn.4).

I think the way of reconciling this conflict is by recognizing that the finer-grained, centered worlds comprising the belief set do not correspond to the content of belief. Stalnaker does not think that centered worlds are necessary for characterizing the content of belief once we recognize the link that such contents bear to the (centered) base world. In Chapter 4 of *Context* Stalnaker writes "it is not necessary to use more fine-grained contents [i.e. centered worlds] once we have added the structure to represent the links between a subject's situation and the *possible worlds* that represent his cognitive state in that situation" (Stalnaker 2014, p.113, my italics).

So I take Stalnaker's view to be that belief contents are given in terms of possible worlds, not centered worlds, and belief contents do not fully determine the *de se* beliefs of a subject. Rather whether a given belief is self-locating for a subject depends on the link between the subject's situation (represented in terms of the base world) and "the possible worlds that represent his cognitive state in that situation".If this interpretation of Stalnaker's view is wrong and, in fact, belief content is characterized in terms of centered worlds and centered worlds determine whether a subject's beliefs are self-locating, then Stalnaker's account poses no threat to, and in fact vindicates, CDDS.

2016, p.133, fn. 21).[9] Weber claims that it is a defining theoretical role of content to reflect differences in cognitive significance. And the beliefs of Boris and Albert have different cognitive significance. Therefore, this difference in cognitive significance ought to be reflected in a difference in content. Stalnaker responds to this argument as follows:

> Weber has an argument against the proposal to treat self-location as a feature of the believer's relation to the content of the belief, rather than as a feature of the content itself. It begins with the following thesis, with which I agree, at least on one way of interpreting it: "It is the defining theoretical role of content to reflect differences in cognitive significance. Beliefs that represent things differently should be assigned different contents." (Weber 2014, 18) It is then argued that since it make a difference to the cognitive significance of a thought that it is self-locating, this feature must be built into the content. But I take the thesis that is the premise of this argument to concern the comparison of the cognitive significance of two beliefs of the same person at the same time. It implies that if O'Leary believes that O'Leary was born in California, but not that he himself was, then we must distinguish the content of the belief from the content of what he does not believe – that he himself was born in California. That is, the thesis implies that we should not explain the difference as a case where the same proposition is believed in one way, but not in another. But the thesis does not imply that the content of Boris's belief that he himself is in the basement must be distinguished from the content of Albert's belief that Boris is in the basement. These are not beliefs that have a different cognitive significance for some one believer" (p.133, fn.21)

We can state the thesis that Stalnaker accepts in the above passage as follows:

(CS1) Necessarily, if S believes b1 at time t and the cognitive significance of S believing b1 at t differs from the cognitive significance of S believing b2 at t, then b1 and b2 have different contents.

And we can state the thesis that he rejects in the above passage as follows:

(CS2) Necessarily, if S believes b1 at time t1, T believes b2 at t2 and S's believing b1 at t1 differs in cognitive significance from T's believing b2 at t2, then b1 and b2 have different contents.

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[9] This way of construing Stalnaker's view is supported by a number of claims that Stalnaker makes such as when he writes "In general, two questions need to [be] distinguished: (1) what is the content of belief? (2) what is the nature of the relation between the believer and the content that constitutes its being the content of his or her belief? I think one should locate the essential indexical element in the answer to the second question" (Stalnaker 1999, p. 21).

Stalnaker's endorsement of (CS1) and rejection of (CS2) is consistent with his idea that belief states, not belief contents, explain action and cognitive significance. In cases where the belief contents are the same, differences in action or cognitive significance can be explained by the fact that a different belief state is involved, where the difference in belief state results from a difference in base world rather than difference in belief content. In cases in which the antecedent of (CS1) is true, a single base world is involved and so differences in cognitive significance must be explained in terms of difference in belief content. In cases where the antecedent of (CS2) is true, it may be the case that different belief states are involved in virtue of differences in base worlds and so the consequent need not hold.

The first difficulty I see with Stalnaker's account is that it is unclear how it is able to distinguish between the case where Boris believes *de se* at 2pm that he is in the basement and the case in which he merely believes at 2pm that Boris is in the basement without having the corresponding *de se* belief. As we've seen, *de se* belief on Stalnaker's account involves appeal to two ingredients: a base world and a belief content. But we can consider a case in which Boris at 2pm believes that he himself is in the basement and a case in which Boris at 2pm believes that Boris is in the basement without believing *de se* that he is in the basement. In both cases the subject is the same and the time of believing is the same. So these features (namely the base world) cannot be appealed to in order to explain the difference in cognitive significance. The only option seems to be to explain the difference in terms of a difference in belief content. But, as we've seen, Stalnaker claims that "the distinctive character of self-locating attitudes does not imply that there is a distinctive kind of self-locating *content*" (Stalnaker 2016, p.112, fn. 4). When it comes to the difference between Boris's belief at 2pm that he himself is in the basement and Boris's third-person belief at 2pm that Boris is in the basement, the distinctive character of self-locating attitudes *does* imply that there is a distinctive kind of self-locating *content.* If the difference is captured at the level of content in such a case, then the question arises why this difference in content doesn't also explain the difference between Boris's belief that he himself is in the basement and Albert's belief that Boris is in the basement. This leads to the second difficulty.

The second difficulty arises when we consider Boris's *de se* belief that he himself is in the basement and Albert's non-*de se* belief that Boris is in the basement. Let us suppose that at 2pm

1. Boris believes that he himself is in the basement.

Let us call the content of Boris's *de se* belief 'C1'. Stalnaker maintains that Albert can believe the same propositions that Boris believes without thereby having a self-locating belief. In the above-quoted passage Stalnaker rejects Weber's argument for the claim that "the content of Boris's belief that he himself is in the basement must be distinguished from the content of Albert's belief that Boris is in the basement" (p.133, fn.21). This supports the following two premises:

2. Albert believes C1 and believes that Boris is in the basement.

3. Albert believes C1 and does not believe that he himself is in the basement.

Given that the case described does not involve any confusion over who is who and no one is ignorant of anyone's location, the following premise is also true.

4. Boris also believes that Boris is in the basement.

Let us call the content of this belief of Boris's 'C2'.
Since Boris's belief at 2pm that he himself is in the basement differs in cognitive significance from Boris's belief that Boris is in the basement (Boris could believe that Boris is in the basement without believing that he is Boris and that he is in the basement and, so, fail to unload the washing machine), it follows from (CS1), the principle that Stalnaker endorses, that:

5. The content of C1 differs from the content of C2.

But we've already noted that the content of Albert's belief that Boris is in the basement is the same as the content of Boris's belief that he himself is in the basement, namely C1. So:

> 6. Therefore, the content of Boris's belief that Boris is in the basement is not the same as the content of Albert's belief that Boris is in the basement.

What Boris believes when Boris believes that Boris is in the basement is not the same as what Albert believes when he believes that Boris is in the basement. This conclusion strikes me as one that Stalnaker would find unwelcome. Part of the motivation for his account is that it allows for a simple, straight-forward account of what it is for two subjects to have the same belief, yet his view seems to commit him to maintaining that Boris and Albert believe different things when they believe that Boris is in the basement. Alternatively, if we grant that the content of Boris's belief that Boris is in the basement is the same as the content of Albert's belief that Boris is in the basement, then we must deny that the content of Albert's belief that Boris is in the basement is the same as the content of Boris's belief that he himself is in the basement.

Stalnaker's acceptance of CS1 and rejection of CS2 strikes me as an unstable and unattractive position. First, it seems to grant that when it comes to beliefs of the same person at the same time, *de se* belief *is* a matter of the content believed. What then motivates denying this dependence of *de se* belief on content when it comes to different subjects or different times? Furthermore, Stalnaker's acceptance of CS1 and rejection of CS2 seem at odds with the very motivations that lead him to claim that Boris's *de se* belief that he himself is the basement has the same content as Albert's non-*de se* belief that Boris is in the basement. Stalnaker's motivation for locating the *de se*-ness in the relation rather than the content is to allow for "agreement and disagreement between believers, and the communication of belief" (Stalnaker 1999, p.20). But this motivation seems to be undermined when we consider Boris's non-*de se* belief that Boris is in the basement and Albert's non-*de se* belief that Boris is in the basement. I don't see how these beliefs can have the same content given that Stalnaker accepts CS1 and claims that Albert's non-*de se*

belief has the same content as Boris's *de se* belief. I conclude that Stalnaker's attempt at denying that *de se* belief is determined by the content of belief is unsuccessful.[10]

4. Perry, Belief States, and Content

Another sort of account that seems to deny CDDS is John Perry's account of *de se* belief. What I will argue in this section is that the sense in which Perry's view appears to reject CDDS is merely terminological and, in the way in which I think the notion of content ought to be understood, Perry's account is in fact in accordance with the thesis.

The view that Perry defends in his landmark 1979 paper "The Problem of the Essential Indexical" involves distinguishing between the content of a belief and the belief state in which the content is believed.[11] Considering the pants-on-fire example above, suppose that David first sees a reflection of himself in the mirror without realizing that it is him and comes to believe of the man in the mirror that his pants are on fire without believing that his own pants are on fire. When David later realizes that his own pants are on fire, Perry maintains that the content of his belief is the same as the content of his belief when he believes of the man in the mirror that his pants are on fire: in both cases it is the singular proposition that David's pants are on fire. However Perry claims that the content is accessed in a different way in each case. Perry notes that, when David realizes that his own pants are on fire, he has something in common with anyone who has found themselves in a similar predicament and would be inclined to say "My pants are on fire!". He denies that what these individuals have in common is the same singular propositional content: if, for example, Susan were to find that her pants are on fire, she would believe a different singular proposition, namely the proposition that Susan's pants are on fire. But nonetheless Susan would be in the same belief state as David despite believing a different content.

Exactly how belief states are to be understood is a matter of some debate, and Perry's own understanding of this notion has evolved over time. Nonetheless, the basic idea

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[10] Given that the second difficulty I raise for Stalnaker's account arises from accepting CS1 and rejecting CS2, would the account avoid difficulty by adopting a uniform approach to the relation between cognitive significance and belief content by accepting both CS1 and CS2? Such an account grants the central premise of Weber's argument for the conclusion that what makes a belief self-locating is a feature of its content, and would end up vindicating CDDS rather than providing an alternative to it. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

[11] It is worth noting that Perry's notion of a belief state differs fundamentally from Stalnaker's notion of a belief state discussed in the previous section.

seems clear enough: all those who are disposed to utter "My pants are on fire!" are in one belief state and all those who are disposed to utter "Your pants are on fire!" are in another belief state, even though, among those classified together by belief state, different singular propositions serve as the content of belief.

If we interpret Perry's account by the letter, it seems to reject CDDS. In our original case, David and Susan have the same relevant belief contents, but they have different *de se* beliefs. David and Susan both have as the content of their belief the singular proposition that David's pants are on fire, but David accesses the proposition through the belief state that is classified by the sentence-type "My pants are on fire" and Susan accesses the proposition through the belief state that is classified by the sentence-type "Your pants are on fire". So it seems that CDDS is violated since David and Susan can have different *de se* beliefs while believing the same content so long as they access the content in different ways.

However I think it would be a mistake to take Perry's account as at odds with CDDS, at least as I intended it. Perry's belief states ought to be understood as having content and so David and Susan differ with respect to their belief contents in virtue of being in different belief states. At the very least, belief states ought to be understood as having content in the sense that I am interested in when formulating the determination thesis. The fact that Perry reserves the term 'content' for the singular proposition believed by the subject is a mere choice in terminology, and belief states ought to be understood as having content because they play the same theoretical roles that contentful states play in other theories. Below I provide three reasons why I think it is correct to maintain that belief states have content.

First, belief states can be classified by abstract objects in the way that content is classified on other accounts. Perry claims that belief states can be classified according to sentence-types containing indexicals, however one could also classify belief states according to properties, functions, or sets of centered worlds.[12] The belief state that David is in when he comes to believe that his own pants are on fire may be taken to be the property of *wearing pants that are on fire*, or a function from individuals to truth-values (returning true for all and only those individuals whose pants are on fire), or a set of worlds centered on all

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[12] Lewis (1979) interprets Perry's view as claiming that belief has two contents: a singular proposition and a function from individuals to singular propositions. See Lewis (1979, p.536-537). So Lewis interprets Perry's belief states as having content.

and only those whose pants are on fire. The fact that there is a natural way of assigning abstract objects to belief states, as in other accounts of belief content, suggests that belief states have content.

A second reason why belief states have content is because they account for similarities and differences in belief between different subjects in the way that other accounts of content do.[13] If I believe that I am the tallest person in the room and you believe that you are the tallest person in the room, there is a straightforward sense in which we believe something similar: there is a sense in which *what* I believe is the same as *what* you believe. This similarity in belief is captured, not by the distinct singular proposition that each of us believes, but rather by the fact that we are both in the same belief state. Similarly, there is a straightforward sense in which David and Susan believe different things when David stops, drops, and rolls, and Susan runs to get a fire extinguisher. This difference is captured, not by the same singular proposition that they both believe, but by the fact that they are in different belief states. It is the role of content to explain what is the same or what is different about two subjects' beliefs and, in these cases, that role is satisfied by the belief states of the subject.

Thirdly, belief states have content because, like other accounts of content, they are representational. One way to see this is by recognizing that some belief states are better at representing a subject's predicament than others. If David's pants are on fire, then if David accesses the singular proposition that David's pants are on fire through the belief state that is classified by the sentence-type "My pants are on fire" he does a better job representing his actual predicament than if he accesses the same singular proposition through the belief state classified by the sentence type "Your pants are on fire". These better and worse ways in which David can represent his actual predicament are not captured by the singular proposition he believes, which is true in both cases. Perhaps it is questionable whether belief states can be properly described as being true or false. However, there is a clear sense in which they represent a subject's predicament and some belief states do a better job at this than others. This suggests that belief states are themselves representational and so satisfy another functional role of belief content.

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[13] Feit (2008) makes a similar point. See pp.61.

Perry's belief states play all the same theoretical roles that content plays on other accounts, and so, I think it is appropriate to conclude that they have content. Given that Perry's belief states have content, I do not think that Perry's account, properly understood, is committed to denying (CDDS). It is true that David and Susan have different content in virtue of being in different belief states with respect to their belief that David's pants are on fire.

5. In Defense of *De Se* Content.

I have argued for the claim that there is no difference in *de se* belief without a difference in content. I have also argued that various attempts at rejecting this argument are unsuccessful. Now I wish to argue that there is a special kind of content that explains difference in action and deserves the name '*de se* content'.

Following Max Kölbel (2013), let us introduce the notion of a *globally portable proposition* as a proposition that does not vary in truth-value within a world. Let us take *locations* as points of evaluation within a world. For our purposes, it doesn't matter whether locations are understood as individuals, places, individual/time pairs, or spacetime points. P is a *globally portable* proposition only if for all locations, l1 and l2, within a world, p is true at l1 if and only if p is true at l2. The account of a globally portable proposition is intended to be neutral with respect to various accounts of what propositions are: so long as the proposition doesn't vary in truth-value within a world, whether it is a singular proposition, a sentence in the language of thought, or a set of possible worlds, it is a globally portable proposition. Also, I am assuming that propositions are true or false *at locations*. It might sound awkward to claim that the proposition that bananas contain potassium is true at Tokyo or at Taylor Swift but, it seems nonetheless correct. If the proposition that bananas contain potassium is true, it is true everywhere in the actual world.

In addition to having global truth-values (i.e. being true (or false) at all points of evaluation within a world), I will also assume that globally portable propositions are *sharable*. If a subject, s1, in w believes globally portable proposition, p, then it is possible *in the relevant sense*, for any subject, s2, in w to also believe p. It is possible *in the relevant sense* for another person to believe p if they are capable of believing it assuming they have

the necessary concepts, the requisite mental abilities, and perhaps necessary experiences.[14] To claim that a proposition is sharable is to deny that accessibility to the proposition is limited in the sense described by Perry (1979, p.15-16). The globally portable proposition that bananas contain potassium is sharable in that, not only do I believe it, but anyone else can also believe it (assuming they have the necessary concepts, mental abilities, and so forth).

My argument for *de se* content is as follows: Let us suppose that David and Susan agree with respect to the relevant globally portable propositions that they believe. Both believe, for example, that David's pants are on fire, that Susan's pants are not on fire, that David is not identical to Susan, that David and Susan are in the same room. It seems plausible to take these propositions to be globally portable: if it is true that David's pants are on fire, then it is true everywhere (within our world) that David's pants are on fire.[15] Suppose also that despite believing all the same relevant globally portable propositions, David and Susan have different *de se* beliefs, in the sense that I've outlined above. Applying CDDS, we reach the conclusion that David and Susan have a difference in belief content. Some of the relevant belief content that differs between David and Susan is not globally portable propositional content since we've supposed that Susan and David agree with respect to the relevant globally portable propositions that they believe. Call the relevant content that is not globally portable and differs between David and Susan '*de se* content'.

One controversial premise in this argument is the claim that David and Susan can have different *de se* beliefs, yet believe the same globally portable propositions. This premise may seem to beg the question against the opponent of uniquely *de se* content. It's important, firstly, to recognize that the premise is only that they have different *de se* beliefs in the weak sense outlined at the beginning of the paper: David produces or is disposed to produce an utterance of "My pants are on fire!" and Susan does not produce nor is disposed to produce this utterance. Secondly, I take this premise to be motivated by the following considerations. Suppose that David and Susan have different *de se* beliefs in this weak

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[14] If an experience or concept is necessary for believing a globally portable proposition, the experience or concept itself must be public in the sense that others can experience it or have the concept. If the experience or concept is not sharable, then the corresponding proposition is not sharable, and hence not a globally portable proposition.

[15] Here and in what follows I put aside issues having to do with time and temporal propositions. If what David and Susan believe is a temporal proposition that is true at some times and false at other times, then it is not globally portable in the sense outlined above (assuming locations exist at different times).

sense. Given this, why can't it be the case that for every relevant globally portable proposition David believes, Susan also believes it, and for every relevant globally portable proposition Susan believes, David also believes it? I fail to see how agreement with respect to globally portable propositions that Susan and David believe would be incompatible with their respective *de se* beliefs. If having different *de se* beliefs requires believing different globally portable propositions, what is the candidate globally portable proposition? What difference in *globally portable* propositions believed would lead David to produce an utterance of "My pants are on fire!" and would lead Susan to produce an utterance of "Your pants are on fire!"?

A more rigorous defense of the premise that David and Susan can believe all the same globally portable propositions, yet have different *de se* beliefs can be given as follows: Suppose that, contrary to the claim I am defending, having different *de se* beliefs *is* due to believing different globally portable propositions. Then the difference in *de se* belief between David and Susan is due to the fact that one of them believes at least one globally portable proposition that the other one fails to believe. In the case where David's pants are on fire and David has the *de se* belief that he would express by saying "My pants are on fire!", it seems plausible to assume that if David's *de se* belief is held in virtue of David believing a globally portable proposition, then that globally portable proposition is true; after all, David's *de se* belief is true: when he utters "My pants are on fire!" he says something true. Let us suppose that difference in *de se* belief between David and Susan is fully explained by the fact that David believes a true globally portable proposition that Susan fails to believe.[16] Call this candidate globally portable proposition 'P'. Given that globally portable propositions are sharable, it is possible for Susan to also believe P and, and given that globally portable propositions, by definition, have the same truth value at all points of evaluation within a world, and Susan and David inhabit the same world, Susan's belief that P would be true. But then David and Susan would believe the same globally portable propositions and so, given that the objector is denying the possibility of believing the same globally portable propositions and having different *de se* beliefs, David and Susan would

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[16] The assumption that there is a unique globally portable proposition that accounts for the difference in *de se* belief between David and Susan is perhaps a simplifying assumption but the argument can be extended to cases where the difference is accounted for by more than one globally portable proposition. Alternatively, one could take P to be the conjunction of all the globally portable propositions that account for the difference in *de se* belief between David and Susan.

have the same *de se* beliefs. Given how we have construed sameness of *de se* belief, this means that Susan would have the *de se* belief that she would express by saying "My pants are on fire!". But this belief would be false since her pants are not on fire. So given that globally portable propositions are sharable and do not vary in truth-value within a world, they cannot account for the difference in *de se* belief between David and Susan.

Once we grant that David and Susan have different *de se* beliefs, we can apply CDDS to conclude that David and Susan have a difference in belief content. The conclusion that they have a difference in belief content, by itself, is perhaps unsurprising. But we are entitled to a stronger conclusion: that there is difference in content *relevant to David and Susan's predicament that is not globally portable*, content that figures into an explanation of the difference in *de se* belief and behavior between David and Susan. Why are we entitled to this stronger conclusion? We've assumed that David and Susan agree with respect to the relevant globally portable propositions that they believe so the difference in content cannot be due to such propositions. This means that the difference in content between David and Susan is either a difference in *irrelevant* globally portable propositions or relevant propositions that are *not globally portable* (propositions that are either not sharable or lack a global truth-value). So long as we insist that there must be an explanation of the difference in *de se* belief and behavior between David and Susan, the difference in content must be due to relevant propositions that are not globally portable. No irrelevant globally portable proposition, such as that David believes that bananas contain potassium and Susan does not, will explain why David produces an utterance of "My pants are on fire" and Susan does not, or why David stops, drops and rolls, and Susan runs to get the fire extinguisher. So there is content relevant to David and Susan's current predicament that is not globally portable, content that figures into an explanation of the difference in *de se* belief and behavior between David and Susan. Call this relevant content that differs between David and Susan '*de se* content'.

Note that I haven't argued for a particular kind of *de se* content, only that such content exists. The result is compatible with a number of different accounts of what constitutes *de se* content. The argument however denies that such content is given by globally portable propositions. There are two ways in which one might deny that such content is globally portable: either by denying its portability or by denying its globality (that

it has global truth-values).[17] Adopting the former way involves positing limited accessibility as Gottlob Frege famously did. According to Frege, David's *de se* belief that his pants are on fire involves David being "presented to himself in a particular and primitive way, in which he is presented to no-one else" (Frege 1918, p.132). A view that claims that David believes a demonstrative proposition that only he has access to, such as *the thinker of this very thought has pants that are on fire*, would likewise deny that the relevant content is portable.[18] On one way of filling in the details, Perry's (1979) account also involves denying portability. If we take belief content to consist of ordered pairs of singular propositions and belief states classified by sentences containing indexicals, then *de se* content is not portable. David's belief that his pants are on fire involves David having the belief content <David's pants are on fire, "My pants are on fire"> and no one else is able to believe this content.[19]

Adopting the latter way, denying globality, involves positing content that differs in truth-value from one individual to the next. One way of doing this is to take *de se* content to be properties rather than traditional propositions as proposed by Lewis (1979) and Chisholm (1981).[20] For David to believe that his pants are on fire is for David to believe (or self-ascribe) the property *wearing pants that are on fire*. This is a property that is had by David but not by Susan. We can take properties to be true *at individuals* just in case the individual has the property ascribed. Susan's belief involves believing a different property such as the property of being perceptually acquainted with someone whose pants are on fire. A

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[17] This point has been made numerous times in the *de se* literature in various ways. In his 2016, Dilip Ninan provides a particularly careful and rigorous characterization of the "problem of *de se* attitudes" and argues that accepting a plausible principle of action explanation leads to an incompatibility between the thesis that contents of attitudes have global truth-values and "the thesis all contents are *public* or *shareable*". He goes on to note that "Thus, it is not surprising that we should find in the literature a view like Lewis's, which denies ABSOLUTENESS, or a view like Frege's, which denies the shareability of *de se* contents" (Ninan 2016, p.110).

[18] I have in mind here a token-reflexive account of *de se* thought such as the one defended in Garcia-Carpintero (2013).

[19] A question arises as to the modal status of non-portability in these accounts. I intend non-portability to be understood in terms of metaphysical possibility: if proposition p serves as the content of S's belief and p is not portable, then it is metaphysically impossible for someone distinct from S to have p as the content of her belief. I take this to be a plausible interpretation of Frege's claim: when David believes that his pants are on fire, it is not merely that he is presented to himself in a way in which no one else actually is (as may be the case when he looks in the mirror when no one else is around), but rather he *cannot* be presented to anyone else in the way in which he is presented to himself. Similarly, the version of Perry's account I have in mind here claims that it is metaphysically impossible for someone distinct from David to have the belief content <David's pants are on fire, "My pants are on fire">. If, for example, a token-reflexive theorist maintains that it is possible for someone other than David to have the belief content *the thinker of this very thought has pants that are on fire,* then such an account would not posit non-portability. Thank you to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

[20] Recent versions of the property account of *de se* content have been defended by Feit (2010) and Recanati (2012).

centered worlds approach to *de se* thought similarly denies that *de se* content has global truth-values.[21] If the content of David's *de se* belief is the set of worlds centered on an individual whose pants are on fire, this content is true at those individuals who have flaming pants and false at those who don't. So, centered worlds content is not true at all locations within the world.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have characterized an account of *de se* belief that is intended to be neutral with respect to the view that there is a special kind of *de se* content. I then argued in favor of a determination thesis relating *de se* belief to belief content. According to the determination thesis, there is no difference in *de se* belief without a difference in belief content. I argued that various proposals that reject this determination thesis face insurmountable difficulties. In the last section I use the determination thesis to argue for a type of content that is deserving of the name '*de se* content'. I also show how *de se* content may differ in kind from non-*de se* content: in virtue of either being non-portable or in virtue of not having global truth-values. I take these considerations to vindicate the view that there is indeed a special kind of content that is not globally portable and is essential to explaining differences in action.[22]

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[21] The centered worlds approach can be traced back to Quine (1969). It has been defended as an account of *de se* content by many including Egan (2006), Elga (2000), Moss (2012) and Ninan (2010). Lewis takes the centered worlds approach to be equivalent to the properties approach he defends (See Lewis 1979, 531-532); thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out. However depending on what one takes properties to be and what one takes centered worlds to be, these accounts need not be equivalent.

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