



THE PHILOSOPHY OF JOSÉ LUIS BERMÚDEZ: AN INTRODUCTION

(*La filosofía de José Luis Bermúdez: una introducción*)

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Few philosophers working today have ranged as widely and as productively across the intersecting territories of philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of psychology and cognitive science, epistemology and the theory of rationality as José Luis Bermúdez. Over a career spanning more than three decades, Bermúdez has offered (and continues to offer) sustained, original, and technically rigorous contributions to questions about —to cite just a few examples— the nature of self-consciousness, the relationship between perception and cognition, mental representation and nonconceptual content, the first-person in both language and thought, decision theory and the rationality of preferences, bodily awareness (the list goes on).¹

This special issue of *THEORIA* brings together nine original contributions that engage critically with various strands of José Luis Bermúdez's work, along with responses by Bermúdez himself. The contributions are grouped into six thematic clusters, and are followed by Bermúdez's responses²: (1) **First-Person Thought** (Víctor M. Verdejo; Matheus Valente), (2) **Sense Data** (Derek H. Brown), (3) **Bodily Awareness and Self-Consciousness** (Shaun Gallagher; Carlota Serrahima), (4) **Inner Speech** (Daphne Bernués & Marta Jorba), (5) **Frames, Preferences, and Rationality** (Daniel Dohrn; Sarah A. Fisher), (6) **Explanation in Cognitive Science** (Marko Jurjako). What follows is a brief description

¹ In 2025 alone, Bermúdez released two new books – the Oxford guide to Aristotle's *De Anima* (2025c) and the edited collection *Sharing thoughts: philosophical perspectives on intersubjectivity and communication* (2025a; co-edited with Víctor M. Verdejo and Matheus Valente) – whereas a third one – *The self in premodern thought: from antiquity to the renaissance in europe* (co-edited with Catherine Conybeare) – is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press.

² Bermúdez's responses are grouped together in a single piece (Bermúdez 2026), structured in six sections, each corresponding to the thematic clusters mentioned above.

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of each cluster and Bermúdez's responses. Far from aiming at exhaustiveness, these summaries are intended simply as an invitation to delve into the exchanges between the contributors and Bermúdez that unfold in the papers and responses collected in this issue.

1. First-Person Thought

First-person thought, a recurring thread in Bermúdez's work since its early beginnings, is given its most systematic presentation by that author in the monograph *Understanding "I": language and thought* (2017a), the primary target of the first two papers collected in this issue by Víctor M. Verdejo and Matheus Valente.³ In particular, both Verdejo and Valente address Bermúdez's defense of the shareability of first-person thoughts (i.e. the claim that, in ordinary conversational contexts, the same thoughts expressible by a subject with 'I' can be expressed by others with 'you'). Indeed, one of the centre pieces of Bermúdez's monograph is a battery of arguments aiming to show that, contrary to what Frege (1918) himself once suggested (as well as more recent neo-Fregean authors such as Evans (1981) and Morgan (2009))⁴, the shareability of first-person thoughts is perfectly compatible with a proper account of their peculiar cognitive and epistemic features.

In *Thoughts about oneself to share in context: meeting Bermúdez's challenge* (Verdejo 2026), Víctor M. Verdejo presents the latest instalment in a critical exchange with Bermúdez which started with Verdejo (2018) and was followed by Bermúdez (2019). Overall, Verdejo is highly sympathetic to the spirit of Bermúdez's project, duly acknowledging the importance of vindicating the shareability of first-person thoughts, though they do disagree about how this ought to be cashed out, as well as the consequences of this view for the individuation of thought. Whereas Bermúdez explains what it is for uses of 'I' and 'you' to express the same (token) thought in terms of the relevant subjects' deploying the same practical capacity for uniquely locating an individual in space-time, Verdejo argues that the same goal can be accomplished in terms of the relevant subjects' deploying thoughts that are constituted by the same reference-rule. To be sure, Verdejo agrees with Bermúdez that the relevant reference-rule cannot be of a traditional token-reflexive kind (e.g. a token-thought involving 'I' refers to its thinker), for then it would not have been possible for the same token-thoughts to be expressible by uses of 'you'. With this in mind, Verdejo proposes an alternative conception of the reference-rule of first-person thoughts, **the self rule**, which determines the referent of these thoughts as *the subject* of the relevant thought. Unlike token-reflexive rules which always refer back to the thinker, the self rule, Verdejo tells us, is perfectly compatible with the shareability of first-person thoughts, as not only the thinker of the relevant thought may be aware of herself as the subject of said thought, but also her interlocutors. This invites us to carefully reconsider the role of the so-called Fregean Criterion in the individuation of first-person thought. But one might take this proposal to ultimately depend on our being able to give a substantial account of what it is for one to be *the subject* of a thought over and above being the thought's referent or the thought's producer, a difficult task the prospects of which Bermúdez evaluates in his response: *Symmetry, privacy, and "I"-thoughts: A reply to Valente and Verdejo*.

Valente's (2026) contribution —*Asymmetries between 'you' and 'I'*— is more pessimistic than Verdejo's regarding the prospects of vindicating first-person thoughts' shareability within a broadly Fregean framework. The central part of this paper revolves around an argument supposed to entail that, if first-person thoughts are shareable, then they cannot play their fundamental role in explanations of rational action and production of motivating reasons. This is a serious accusation given that, not only Bermúdez, but anybody who sympathises with the need to distinguish between sense and reference will be prone to accept a constitutive connection between thought and rational action.⁵ In rough terms, the key

³ See also Bermúdez (2005b, 2011b, 2017b, 2019).

⁴ Frege once suggested that first-person thoughts are incommunicable given that they are based on a primitive way in which each subject is presented to oneself but to no one else. Both Evans (1981) and Morgan (2009) develop this type of reasoning and ultimately subscribe to the privacy of first-person thoughts.

⁵ Valente's argument harks back to Perry's (1977) notorious bear attack scenario.

idea is that two subjects might have distinct reasons for action even if they share all of each other's third-person beliefs and desires. If first-person thoughts were shareable, Valente argues, then the difference between these subjects' reasons would be left without any plausible attitudinal explanation. Valente's argument crucially relies on the assumption that motivating reasons supervene on nothing but agents' attitudinal states. However, one may fairly wonder whether this restrictive picture leaves out anything of importance. In his response, Bermúdez emphasises the role of agents' occurrent states (e.g. perceptions) for the production of rational action and, noticing this relevant issue's omission from Valente's discussion, deploys it in an attempt to defuse his argument.

2. *Sense Data*

Bermúdez's work in the philosophy of perception stands tall among his philosophical achievements. This most obviously includes a set of highly influential papers on the notion of nonconceptual content. Slightly less well-known is his examination of the prospects for a naturalistic treatment of sense data in his 2000 paper *Naturalized sense data*, the main target of the third contribution to this issue, Derek H. Brown's *From immediate perception to perceptual belief* (Brown 2026).⁶

Bermúdez's (2000) *naturalized sense datum theory* (NSD) differs from traditional *sense datum* theory (SDT) in taking the immediate objects of perception, i.e. *sense data*, to be physical objects – though not the familiar three-dimensional objects to which we routinely refer in demonstrative thought and speech, but their facing surfaces. Bermúdez's hypothesis was that the NSD is a sort of best of both worlds: it preserves the core insights that have historically lent plausibility to the SDT while avoiding the pitfalls of uncritical direct realism.

Brown is not convinced of Bermúdez's argument for the superiority of NSD over SDT in better accounting for the explanatory connection between our immediate objects of perception and our capacity for demonstrative reference to ordinary physical objects. He thus sets out both to show how, contrary to Bermúdez's claim, SDT is consistent with our capacity for acquiring (mediate) knowledge about the external world and to raise independent issues with NSD regarding its prospects for dealing with the Problem of Perception (i.e. explaining both the differences and the similarities between veridical, illusory, and hallucinatory perceptual experiences). Regardless of that, Brown closes his piece with a rejoinder friendly to Bermúdez, in noticing that many of NSD's resources will still be foundational to any theory – *sense datum*-based or not – of perception and of perceptual demonstratives.

In his response, Bermúdez attempts to tackle both horns of Brown's criticism, renewing his challenge to the defender of SDT's capacity to deploy the concept of deferred ostension in explaining demonstrative reference to ordinary physical objects as well as sketching a strategy with which the defender of NSD might tackle the Problem of Perception.

3. *Bodily Awareness and Self-Consciousness*

The bodily self: selected essays (Bermúdez, 2018a) remains an important landmark in the philosophical study of bodily awareness and its relation to self-consciousness, providing a comprehensive examination of the ways in which embodiment is constitutively connected to some of the most primitive forms of self-awareness in conscious beings.⁷ Though

⁶ It might be worth noticing that interest in Bermúdez's paper has been growing steadily, especially in recent years, most likely due to renewed interest in *sense datum* theories in contemporary philosophy. If Philpapers is right, it took close to ten years for Bermúdez's 2000 paper to receive its first citation. Notwithstanding that, the paper currently holds approximately thirty citations, almost all in publications from the last decade or so. Derek H. Brown's contribution to this issue along with Bermúdez's response are thus timely additions to this recent trend.

⁷ See also Bermúdez (1998, 2020b).

they approach this topic from different angles, this issue's contributions by Shaun Gallagher (2026) and by Carlota Serrahima (2026) fit together as explorations of Bermúdez's work on the body's involvement in self-consciousness.

Shaun Gallagher's contribution —*Why a perceptual zero-point amounts to nothing*— offers a probing critique of the commonly held view of the body as a sort of perceptual zero-point from which the world is egocentrically experienced and acted upon. His is a historically-informed, critical analysis of authors ranging from the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, to analytic philosophers of mind like Gareth Evans and Christopher Peacocke. Against them, Gallagher argues that the notion of a perceptual zero-point fails to carry the phenomenological weight assigned to it, and instead proposes a more complex view according to which the processes involved in perception and action must be mapped onto (different parts of) the body along varying axes and dimensions. Taking recourse from Bermúdez's own distinction between three different frames of bodily reference, as well as resources from the enactivist tradition, Gallagher sets forth a "thick" view of bodily experience based on agentive situations, which bring together agents *and* their environments. These situations are defined by actions that are structured by the subject's affordances, taking place in different time scales with varying degrees of intentionality.

Carlota Serrahima's paper —*Self-Consciousness, ψ and ϕ* — examines the distinctions between the psychological (ψ) and bodily (ϕ) dimensions of self-consciousness with the underlying aim of assessing the prospects for unified accounts of both phenomena, such as Bermúdez's own.⁸ One important insight of Serrahima's piece is that for both forms of ownership, ψ and ϕ , an equilibrium must be reached between two oppositely pulling ideas. Regarding ϕ -ownership, on the one hand, it seems there is an intimate link between experiences of bodily sensations and self-attributions of bodily ownership. On the other hand, empirical research points towards a break between them, as indicated by subjects reporting a lack of bodily ownership where bodily sensations are nonetheless present. ψ -ownership presents a parallel situation; authors maintain there is a compelling link between the presence of phenomenal states and a self which attributes said states. Similarly, however, empirical studies on phenomena such as cases of thought insertion point to a parallel break between occurrences of experiences and their self-attribution by subjects. In exploring the logical space for views on the senses of ownership respectively associated to ψ and ϕ self-consciousness, Serrahima argues that the positing of a distinctive phenomenology of ownership represents the best prospects for an integrated account of ψ and ϕ self-consciousness. As Serrahima argues, this raises a serious difficulty to Bermúdez's ambitions of giving a unified account of these phenomena while simultaneously endorsing the elusiveness of the self (while obviously *not* endorsing the analogous thesis of the elusiveness of the body).

Bermúdez's reply —*Elusiveness and the phenomenology of the self: Response to Gallagher and Serrahima*— engages with both the phenomenological and conceptual dimensions of these authors' challenges. In his response to Gallagher, Bermúdez sets out to clarify his own view on what is the central question regarding the notion of the body as a perceptual zero-point —i.e. not whether prereflective experience of the body is *of* a zero-point, as he takes Gallagher to presuppose, but instead: what it is like for experience to be *from* a perceptual zero-point— as well as to draw out some important interconnections between this issue and the elusiveness of the self. This allows Bermúdez to smoothly transition to his discussion of Serrahima's paper, wherein Humean worries about the self are discussed alongside Wittgenstein's distinction between the self-as-object and the self-as-subject, ultimately leading him to concede to Serrahima that his old account of bodily self-ascription ought to be revised in order to reconcile the elusiveness of the self with (much less elusive) bodily phenomenology.

4. Inner Speech

Daphne Bernués and Marta Jorba's (2026) joint contribution —*Bermúdez on inner speech: A critical assessment*— turns attention to Bermúdez's paper 'Inner speech, determinacy, and thinking consciously about thoughts' (2018b) where

⁸ Serrahima mostly focuses on Bermúdez's paper "The elusiveness thesis, immunity to error through misidentification, and privileged access", reprinted as chapter 4 in Bermúdez (2018a).

some of the key ideas developed in his monograph *Thinking without words* (2003) are applied to the phenomenon of inner speech. One of the central claims made by Bermúdez is that intentional ascent, the capacity to think about thoughts, requires semantic ascent, the capacity to think about words or linguistically represented thoughts. According to Bermúdez, inner speech is a key tool for semantic ascent. Therefore, inner speech is taken to be the main vehicle through which second-order thinking about thoughts takes place.

Bernués and Jorba subject Bermúdez's proposal to sustained scrutiny along two clearly distinct lines. First, they argue that his dependency thesis does not hold up in light of empirical research (citing, for example, studies indicating that children age 4-6, when inner speech is yet not developed, are capable of reflexive forms of thinking regardless). Second, they argue that it runs into an explanatory dilemma stemming from Bermúdez's view that a thought's canonical structure must be revealed in thinking about it through inner speech. Confronted with the semantic indeterminacy of natural language sentences,⁹ Bermúdez must hold that subpersonal computations deliver a determinate content apprehensible in inner speech. As Bernués & Jorba argue, this move leads to the following dilemma regarding inner speech's explanatory status: on the one hand, if content is determined subconsciously, it is not clear why we need expanded forms of inner speech and not highly condensed ones (which presumably would not reveal its canonical structure), rendering expanded inner speech superfluous; on the other hand, if we instead accept the need for these expanded forms of inner speech, the problem becomes that of determining the form of the proposition being tokened. We may only be able to arrive at the right proposition by a revelation of its logical form through formal means, but that is clearly not what is entertained in inner speech, in which case inner speech is inaccurately described. Bernués & Jorba's contribution ends with a proposal amenable to Bermúdez's insights: while inner speech may be *one* way of helping make thoughts conscious, there may be other ways, such as certain forms of unsymbolized thinking.

Bermúdez responds in *Inner speech and intentional ascent: Reply to Bernués and Jorba*. In this piece, he starts by suggesting there be alternative interpretations of the empirical data put forth in their paper, alluding to a distinction between intentional ascent properly speaking and more primitive analogues of that capacity. However, the bulk of Bermúdez's response consists in his attempt to tackle both horns of Bernués & Jorba's explanatory dilemma, one whose force and originality Bermúdez is quick to acknowledge, a task which ultimately requires him to submit aspects of his previous view to revision.

5. *Frames, Preferences, and Rationality*

Bermúdez's latest monograph, *Frame it again: new tools for rational choice* (2020a), sees that author engaging with fundamental disputes in decision theory and, more broadly, the theory of rationality.¹⁰ Among its important contributions is the development of a sophisticated account of practical rationality which takes framing phenomena and framing effects as integral and ineliminable elements of that type of reasoning—as opposed to lesser-important deviations of ideal rationality, as the orthodoxy in decision theory has traditionally maintained. One upshot of Bermúdez's proposal is that, due to framing-sensitivity, perfectly rational agents might have quasi-cyclical preferences whereby they prefer A to B, and B to C, while knowing full well that A and C are the same option differently framed.

Daniel Dohrn's paper in this issue —*Can quasi-cyclical preferences be rational?*— challenges some of Bermúdez's most fundamental claims: whether preferences are frame-relative, whether there are in fact such quasi-cyclical preferences, and whether these could play the role in rational deliberation that Bermúdez claims they do. It seems, Dohrn tells us, that a plausible necessary condition for preference is that one consciously, deliberately, and voluntarily acts on one only

⁹ The objection from semantic indeterminacy is due to Martínez-Manrique & Vicente (2010), a work which plays an important role in both Bernués & Jorba's contribution and Bermúdez's response.

¹⁰ See also Bermúdez (2011a, 2022a, 2022b).

if one does not have an overriding preference. Quasi-cyclical preferences do not satisfy this condition, as one will not be able to act on a quasi-cyclical preference consciously, deliberately, and voluntarily given the existence of an overriding preference existing under a different frame. We also find a problem of attribution of such quasi-cyclical preferences: it is not clear why we need to posit them to explain a subject's overt actions instead of using more orthodox tools, such as wishes or desires. More importantly, perhaps, is the role for rationality that Bermúdez wants to attribute to these preferences. Dohrn makes an illuminating distinction between two ways a preference may be labelled as rational: that of *input*-rationality, concerning the processes that influence decision-making, and that of *output*-rationality, which properly concerns the action-guiding role of a preference. We may accept that quasi-cyclical preferences may hold a rational role on the input side, as the practice of a subject's framing and reframing their preferences may be a good way of responding to some complex situation. However, dove-tailing his answer to the question concerning their status, Dohrn concludes that quasi-cyclical preferences cannot count as rational on the output side given the tension between one preference's (under a frame) guiding a subject's action, and there being another preference (under a different frame) that overrides the former. Dohrn ends the piece by demonstrating this conclusion as applied to three applications of Bermúdez's framework: time-inconsistencies, game theory, and interpersonal conflicts.

As a nice continuation of the previous contribution, Sarah Fisher's (2026) paper —*Discursive deadlock and the social (media) life of frames*— engages directly with the question of how the framing framework can both account for, and give solutions to situations of interpersonal conflict or, as Bermúdez also calls them, of discursive deadlock. In short, Bermúdez's claim is that they are situations in which subjects' frames clash with each other. As a solution, subjects ought to engage in frame-sensitive reasoning, ideally adopting one another's frames to better understand each other. Fisher pushes an objection against the very foundation of Bermúdez's proposal: that frames do not (always) put subjects in touch with *reasons*, but instead may also serve as signals of identity and social affiliation. She draws an interesting comparison with the phenomena of slurs and dogwhistles, as two cases where linguistic devices also function for the purpose of signaling identity and affiliation. The upshot of this alternative function of frames is two-fold. First, that discursive deadlock may be caused less by the opposing reasons that subjects entertain under their respective frames, and more by the social identity that they intend to present via said frames. Second, that Bermúdez's prescription for the adoption of one another's frames may be neither practical nor effective. Fisher finally turns to social media to highlight this point, as a case study of the way users may be compelled, not to perform the frame-relative due diligence Bermúdez calls for, but to remain in their identity-building and identity-sustaining frames. In this context, discursive deadlock, it is concluded, may be more readily dealt with through changes in the very structure of (online) social interactions.

Bermúdez responds to both papers in *Preferences, frames, and reasons: Reply to Dohrn and Fisher*. His response to Dohrn focuses primarily on defending his original position. Against Dohrn's scepticism, Bermúdez maintains that quasi-cyclical preferences do not reflect irrationality but arise from the way objects of preference are presented, altogether defending the possibility of rational framing effects more generally. Turning to Fisher, Bermúdez addresses her concerns about the normative ambitions of frame-sensitive reasoning, particularly its role in resolving discursive deadlock. While acknowledging Fisher's point that frames can function as signals of identity and affiliation, he argues that this does not undermine their potential to structure reasoning and facilitate progress in difficult deliberative contexts.

6. Explanation in Cognitive Science

In *Philosophy of psychology: a contemporary introduction* (2005a) and the first two editions of the textbook *Cognitive science: an introduction to the science of the mind* (2010, 2014), Bermúdez argued for significant limits on the applicability of Marr's (1982) tri-level analysis which analyzes cognitive systems at computational, algorithmic, and implementational levels. Specifically, Bermúdez maintained that this framework is probably only applicable to modular systems but not to the mind as a whole.

Marko Jurjako's (2026) contribution to this issue —*How general are Marr's levels of analysis?*— reexamines these claims in the light of recent theoretical developments in active inference and the free energy principle. The piece follows a clear argumentative strategy: Jurjako first provides reasons to think that, *contra* Bermúdez, Marr's tri-level analysis can in fact be applied at the non-modular level; then, through an appeal to the active inference model, which Jurjako shows how to map onto the Marrian levels of analysis, he presents a positive reevaluation of the applicability of the tri-level analysis to the mind as a whole. In rough terms, the active inference framework rests on the free energy principle, which claims that self-organising systems work to reduce the amount of environmental surprise in order to maintain their physical integrity. The general purpose of an intelligent mind, as Jurjako argues, may be seen as that of minimising uncertainty (and minimising loss of energy). Importantly, the application of the free energy principle to the study of the mind promises to provide a bridge between personal-level and subpersonal-level explanation (or even to blur their distinction).

Bermúdez responds to Jurjako in *Active inference, the Free Energy Principle, and Marr's tri-level hypothesis: Reply to Jurjako*. While Bermúdez grants that the free energy principle may indeed help illuminate the personal/subpersonal interface, he is more sceptical about its fitting the requirements of the essentially top-down Marrian approach, such as the identification of algorithmically tractable effective procedures linking inputs to outputs. For this reason, Bermúdez maintains his opinion that Marr's tri-level analysis cannot be applied to the mind as a whole, though he acknowledges the possibility that further developments in these areas might lead him to revise his conviction.

7. Concluding Remarks

We hope readers will indulge us in repeating our opening statement; we believe that, together, the diverse and compelling contributions gathered in this special issue serve as a powerful testament to both the extensive reach and the profound intellectual fertility of José Luis Bermúdez's philosophical vision. The papers collected here span a considerable spectrum, ranging from friendly extensions of his theoretical frameworks to incisive critical challenges that push the boundaries of his views. Yet Bermúdez's responses display an equal range of tact, from firm defenses of his original views, to acknowledgments of their limitations and some proposed revisions. Along with its dialectical nature, the special issue's sheer breadth of topics marks out a remarkably wide and rich terrain for contemporary analytic philosophy.

We wish to express our profound gratitude to all the contributors for their exceptionally stimulating and thought-provoking papers, which have enriched this volume immensely. Our thanks are equally extended to Professor Bermúdez for his generous expenditure of time and intellectual effort in providing thorough and insightful engagement with each and every contribution. We also wish to convey our sincere appreciation to the editors of *THEORIA* for their support throughout the entire duration of this project. Furthermore, we commend *THEORIA*'s continued commitment to ensuring that cutting-edge philosophical work is made freely and openly accessible to the widest possible global audience.

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