Is Belief a Propositional Attitude?

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Introduction

According to current philosophical orthodoxy, a belief report such as (1) is true just in case the subject of the attribution stands in the belief relation to a proposition that is referred to by the that-clause in the context of attribution:

(1) Gwen believes that smoking is unhealthy.

If (1) is true, it is claimed, there is something Gwen believes, this “something” being a proposition that is referent of ‘that smoking is unhealthy’ in the context of utterance. At the core of this familiar picture are two intimately related theses:

The Semantic Thesis: In a literal utterance of the belief report ‘S believes that p’ the that-clause functions as a referential singular term, the semantic value of which is a proposition; the report being true just in case the proposition is among the things S believes.

The Metaphysical Thesis: The mental states that realize our beliefs are genuinely propositional attitudes — relations between agents and propositions.¹

Following Stephen Schiffer, we will call the conjunction of these theses the face-value theory.

The face-value theory so permeates the philosophical discussion of the semantics of belief reports that it has become standard practice to discuss the topic under the rubric “propositional attitude ascriptions”. No doubt, a careful perusal of the literature will reveal a few outliers; but far more often than not, the face-value view is simply assumed without argument.² The bulk of the literature on “propositional” attitude ascriptions has been, by and large, a debate between

¹. Here, and in what follows, I will assume that a proposition is true or false (simpliciter) relative to a circumstance of evaluation, where “circumstances of evaluation” are identified in the standard way.

². Amongst these outliers one will often find proponents of some or other version of a sententialist account (see, for example, Ludwig and Ray 1998 and
fellow proponents of the face-value view concerning the nature of the propositions that are (putatively) the objects of belief and the referents of that-clauses.

As the scare quotes, italics, and parenthetical remarks in the foregoing might suggest, I am skeptical of the face-value theory. As I shall argue, even if we assume (i) that the metaphysical thesis is true and (ii) that that-clauses are indeed referential singular terms, the semantic thesis is false. There are cases in which a belief report of the form ‘S believes that p’ is true, yet there is no particular proposition that the occurrence of the that-clause can (in the context of utterance) plausibly be taken as referring to. The strategy I will pursue develops considerations that Schiffer has offered against theories that make essential appeal to modes of presentation, or guises, in analyzing belief-reports—a problem he dubbed the *meaning-intention problem.* I claim that the meaning-intention problem calls into question all versions of the face-value approach.

Section One presents the most widely accepted versions of the face-value theory—namely, *Russellian* and *Fregean* accounts. Section Two presents difficulties for these versions of the face-value theory, and then argues that the meaning-intention problem threatens to generalize to all versions of the face-value theory. Section Three turns to Schiffer’s version of the face-value theory, on which that-clauses are taken to refer to fine-grained, unstructured, *pleonastic* propositions. Schiffer’s account of that-clause reference would, if correct, potentially provide the face-value theorist a response to the meaning-intention worry. But, as I will argue, it is unclear whether Schiffer’s account provides a compelling response to the meaning-intention problem. Section Four considers what the rejection of the semantic thesis might tell us about the metaphysical thesis.

The terrain here is vast. Thus, some working hypotheses are in order, which I will provisionally assume without argument:

- **WH1** That-clauses are indeed singular terms, the semantic function of which is to refer to the sorts of entities that are the objects of belief.
- **WH2** Even if the metaphysical thesis should ultimately turn out false, propositions are, at least, *among* the things we believe.

Though WH1 is far from uncontroversial, the hypothesis is, at least, prima facie plausible and is accepted by proponents of the face-value theory. The full import of WH2 will become clearer in Section Four, when I consider a possible response to the meaning-intention problem that seeks to hold onto WH1 by revising the metaphysical thesis so as to allow non-propositional entities to be among the things we believe. I conclude with a brief discussion of some of the problems, and prospects, of this response, and where we are left should WH1 prove to be untenable.

1. The Face-Value Theory

Face-value theorists accept the semantic thesis, and hence that ‘believes’ expresses a relation between agents and the referents of that-clauses, with ‘S believes that p’ being true (in a context c) just

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Higginbotham 2006), and even the occasional proponent of a Russellian multiple-relation account (for example, Moltmann 2003).

Even among the friends of propositions, there are at least a few prominent theorists who do not accept the semantic thesis. For example, King 2002 remains neutral on the semantic thesis (as well as WH1 below), and Richard 1993 accepts only a qualified version of it. See fn. 25 for a brief discussion of ‘partial characterization’ accounts of belief-reports.

3. See Schiffer 1981, 1992, 1993, and 1994. It is important to note that Schiffer no longer accepts the meaning-intention argument. Schiffer 2003 rejects the meaning-intention argument in connection with the determination of that-clause reference; see Section Three below for discussion. More recently, in an unpublished manuscript entitled ‘Some Effects of Vagueness on Meaning’, Schiffer offers an important development of his 2003 account of propositional content and reference. Along the way, Schiffer presents some novel considerations against the Gricean assumptions presupposed in his earlier statements of the meaning-intention problem. For reasons of both space and manageability, I must postpone discussion of Schiffer’s more recent considerations on the meaning-intention problem for future work.

4. See King 2002, McGrath 2007, and Schiffer 2003, as well as the references therein, for a discussion of the viability of both the semantic thesis and WH1.
in case $S$ stands in the belief relation to the referent (in $c$) of ‘that $p$’. In support of the thesis that that-clauses are singular terms, face-value theorists are likely to cite the apparent validity of arguments such as (A) and (B):

(A) Chet believes everything Tim says.  
\[
(\forall w)(\text{Stw} \rightarrow \text{Bcw})
\]
Tim said that Kurt Russell has won an Oscar.  
\[
\text{Sta}
\]
Chet believes that Kurt Russell has won an Oscar.  
\[
\text{Bca}
\]

(B) Chet believes that Kurt Russell has won five Oscars.  
\[
\text{Bca}
\]
Tim believes that Kurt Russell has won five Oscars.  
\[
\text{Bta}
\]
Therefore, Chet and Tim believe the same thing.  
\[
(\exists x)(\text{Bcx} \land \text{Btx})
\]

If we take the surface syntax of a simple report such as the second premise of (B) to be a guide as to its logical form, it is prima facie plausible that ‘believes’ expresses a two-place relation between agents and the semantic values of that-clauses, whatever those should turn out to be. Moreover, when we consider what kind of entity it could be that such a singular term refers to, it is initially plausible to think it is something possessing truth-conditions — here, plausibly, a proposition that is true just in case Kurt Russell has in fact won an Oscar. If ‘that Kurt Russell has won an Oscar’ is a singular term that refers to the same proposition in each occurrence, and ‘believes’ expresses a two-place relation, the validity of these arguments should present no mystery.

Though all face-value theorists accept the semantic thesis, there is disagreement regarding the further details of the theory. While face-value theorists are likely to disagree on the exact nature of the objects of our belief, it is generally assumed — and will be assumed in what follows — that propositions are structured entities that have truth-conditions. To say that a proposition is structured is to say that it is a complex with constituents, the identity and arrangement of which determine of its truth-conditions.

Proponents of structured propositions can be divided into two camps: Russelians and Fregeans. Russelians argue that the propositions we believe are structured entities whose building blocks are objects, properties, and relations that figure in the determination of truth-conditions, whereas Fregeans claim that they are constructed from concepts, or ways of thinking, of such objects, properties, and relations. I suspect that these views will be familiar to many readers, but it will be helpful to emphasize certain features that will be relevant to our discussion later.

The Russelian is impressed by the fact that referring expressions are rigid designators. Suppose I utter (2):

\[
(2) \quad 50 \text{ Cent is talented.}
\]

If I am speaking literally, my utterance of (2) will be true at a world $w$ if, and only if, there is some person at $w$ to which my use of ‘50 Cent’ refers, and that person is talented at $w$. More generally, once the context of utterance is fixed, a genuine referring expression will then pick out the same individual in any possible world in which that individual exists. This suggests that what ‘50 Cent’ contributes to the proposition expressed by (2) is just the individual referred to, rather than a way of thinking of him. (Analogous considerations can be marshaled for holding that the semantic contribution of a predicate is the property or relation it expresses.) Hence, if in uttering (3) I am referring to 50 Cent with my use of ‘he’, then my utterance will have the same semantic content as my utterance of (2):

\[
(3) \quad \text{He is talented.}
\]

Relative to the Russelian framework, we might represent the semantic content of (2) and (3) as the ordered pair:

\[
(2a) \quad <50 \text{ Cent, having talent}>
\]

where (2a) is true at a world $w$ if, and only if, 50 Cent exists at $w$ and has talent at $w$.
Such Russellian propositions function not only as the semantic contents of our utterances but also as the objects of our belief. If (4) is true, there is something that Chet believes:

(4) Chet believes that 50 Cent is talented.

Russellians will hold that the that-clause in (4) is a semantically complex referring expression, the referent of which is the “singular” proposition that (2) expresses — namely, (2a). The Russellian will therefore represent the semantic content of the belief report (4) as (4a):

(4a) <<Chet, <50 Cent, having talent>>, Believes>

To claim that the that-clause in (4) is “semantically complex” is just to say that its reference is determined by its syntax and the semantic values of its parts. In those cases where the relevant that-clause is context sensitive, owing to the context sensitivity of one or more of its components, the reference of the (token) that-clause will be determined as a function of its syntax, and the semantic values of its constituents in the context of utterance.

The Russellian might develop her view in any number of ways. For example, she might supplement her understanding of the semantic thesis with an account of the pragmatics of belief reports. As Russellians will be the first to admit, the predictions of their theory are in tension with many speakers’ intuitive judgments regarding the truth-conditions of belief reports across a wide range of cases. For example, it follows from their view that since Curtis Jackson is 50 Cent, anyone who believes 50 Cent is talented will believe that Curtis Jackson is talented, even if she is a perfectly competent speaker who fervently insists that ‘Curtis Jackson is talented’ is false, and (moreover) that ‘Curtis Jackson is not talented’ is true. Supposing Chet to be such a speaker, many if not most speakers would be inclined to judge that even if (4) is true, (5) is false:

(5) Chet believes that Curtis Jackson is talented.

The Russellian might respond that a speaker uttering a belief-report S regularly does so in order to communicate a proposition other than the one S semantically expresses. The ubiquity of this practice, however, makes it unsurprising that we sometimes take speakers to be asserting such “pragmatically conveyed” propositions in making belief-reports. The Russellian who pursues this line might claim that in a case such as (5), a speaker who judges the report to be false is taking the belief-reporter to have asserted some or other false proposition pragmatically conveyed by the utterance. The false pragmatically conveyed proposition might, for example, be that Chet would dissent from ‘Curtis Jackson is talented’. (The details will vary depending upon which Russellian you ask.)

A second way in which the Russellian face-value theorist might seek to supplement her view is motivated by worries concerning the rationality of agents, such as Chet, to whom we are ascribing beliefs. Suppose that Chet fervently accepts as true ‘Curtis Jackson is not talented,’ and that on this basis, we take the belief report in (6) to be true:

(6) Chet believes that Curtis Jackson is not talented.

However, if the Russellian theorist is correct, and both (4) and (6) are true, then Chet believes contradictory propositions. Prima facie, this conflicts with our assumption that Chet is fully rational. The Russellian owes us an explanation of why this should be so.

Russellians typically respond by claiming that one doesn’t believe a proposition *simpliciter* but only in some particular way — under some mode of presentation, or guise. For example, she may claim the two-place relation ‘believes’ is to be “analyzed” (à la Salmon 1986) in terms of an underlying ternary relation that obtains between an agent, a Russellian proposition, and a mode of presentation of that proposition:

5. See David Braun 1998 for an interesting attempt to give a non-pragmatic account of anti-Russellian intuitions about substitutivity.

6. See, for example, Braun 1998 and Recanati 1993 for compelling arguments against these implicature-based accounts.
BEL Necessarily [Believes(x, p) iff \( \exists m [\text{BEL}(x, p, m)] \)]

where \( x \) is an agent, \( p \) is a Russellian proposition, and \( m \) is a mode of presentation, or a way of apprehending, \( p \) (hereafter, a MOP). Though details vary, Russelians will agree that whatever MOPs turn out to be, they must be such that an agent can rationally believe a (Russelian) proposition \( p \) under one MOP while rationally believing its negation under a distinct MOP.

In response to the worry regarding Chet’s rationality, our Russellian will concede that if both (4) and (6) are true, then Chet believes both a proposition and its negation, but this is not worrisome in light of the foregoing discussion concerning the BEL relation. In this case, it is plausible that Chet internally assents to (2a) under (something like) a rapper-named-’50 Cent’-mode, but assents to its negation under a guy-called-’Curtis Jackson’-mode. The Russelian who pursues this line of response will insist that although there will always be some particular way in which an agent believes a Russellian proposition, no particular such way (or type thereof) is referred to, or specified, in a true belief attribution. Rather, a report such as (6) will be true so long as there is some way or other in which the agent in question believes the relevant proposition specified by the that-clause.

Face-value theorists who (i) seek to hold that reports such as (4) and (5) can literally diverge in truth-value, and (ii) find themselves suspicious of the Russellian’s distinction between “what an agent believes” and “how she believes it” might be inclined to accept some or other Fregean account. According to Fregean theorists, the propositional objects of our belief are built (at least in part) from MOPs, or concepts, of the objects, properties, and relations that our thoughts might concern.

The Fregean face-value theorists might pursue any number of different options in spelling out her account. She might, for example, minimally depart from the Russellian’s metaphysics of belief-states and claim that the propositional contents should be taken to be pairs of Russellian propositions and MOPs of their constituents. For example, on Recanati’s 1993 account, the content of the belief reported in (4) might be represented as the quasi-singular proposition in (4b):

\[
(4b) \langle \langle 50 \text{ Cent, } M_{50 \text{ Cent}} \rangle, \langle \text{the property of being talented, } M_{\text{talented}} \rangle \rangle
\]

where \( M_{50 \text{ Cent}} \) and \( M_{\text{talented}} \) are ways Chet has of thinking of 50 Cent and the property of being talented, respectively. Like the Russelian, the proponent of Recanati’s suggestion will hold that the referent of a (token) that-clause is determined by its syntax and the semantic values of its components in the context of utterance.

Regardless of which particular account the Fregean settles on, she should want to allow that distinct Fregean propositions can have exactly the same modal profile, if she is to accommodate the plausible Kripkean-inspired morals in the theory of reference that help to motivate Russellian accounts. On Recanati’s suggestion, this result is secured by claiming that while MOPs are relevant to what is required to believe a quasi-singular proposition, they are irrelevant to the truth-conditions of the proposition so believed. Thus, (4b) has exactly the same possible-world truth-conditions as that of the MOP-free singular Russellian proposition (2a). (A similar result follows if, following Evans and McDowell, we take MOPs to contain the objects they present, so to speak.)

Since Fregean and Russellian accounts are the most common face-value approaches, our critical discussion of the face-value theory will be directed to these two versions of the view. It may also turn out that both Fregean and Russellian propositions will play a role in the metaphysics of belief, even if the semantic thesis fails, and with it the face-value view.

2. The Meaning-Intention Problem

My ultimate aim is to show that there are perfectly pedestrian belief-reports of the form ‘S believes that p’ which are true, but in which there is no particular proposition that we can (in the context) plausibly take the that-clause to refer to. Towards this end, I argue that, in such cases, neither the communicative intentions of the speaker nor the context-invariant meanings of the that-clause’s constituents uniquely
determine the that-clause’s reference. And since it is (at best) extremely unclear what other factors could be relevant to the determination of a proposition as the referent of the relevant that-clause (in such cases), I conclude that speakers cannot intend to communicate, much less literally mean or state, what the face-value theory requires.

The argument I will give in favor of this conclusion derives from considerations that Schiffer has offered against Fregean versions of the face-value theory. In this section I first present Schiffer’s meaning-intention problem for Fregean accounts, then go on to show how the problem generalizes to coarser-grained accounts.

2.1 Against Fregean Propositions

Assume momentarily that the metaphysical thesis is true, and Fregean propositions are the objects of our beliefs. Given this assumption, is it plausible to hold that that-clauses refer to Fregean propositions?

Stephen Schiffer has argued, quite persuasively, that the answer is ‘No.’ Here is a crucial passage:

Intuitively, ‘believes that Fido is a dog’ may be univocally true of people who think of Fido and doghood in radically different ways (you and Helen Keller may be among them) and who do not share any single mode of presentation for either Fido or doghood. This shows that ‘that Fido is a dog’ makes no context-independent reference to a mode-of-presentation-containing-proposition. At the same time, a speaker may truly say that so-and-so believes Fido is a dog even though she is not in a position to refer to any particular mode of presentation so-and-so has for either Fido or doghood. This shows that the that-clause makes no-context dependent reference to a mode-of-presentation-containing-proposition. And if it makes neither a context-independent reference nor context-dependent reference to such a proposition,

then it makes no reference to one. [1993, p. 100, fn. 11, emphasis mine]

Let’s unpack this.

MOPs are introduced to capture an agent’s ways of thinking of the objects, properties, and relations her belief concerns. They will thus be highly idiosyncratic, varying significantly from agent to agent. There are, of course, many cognitively nonequivalent ways of thinking of one and the same object. According to the Fregean, whenever Gwen thinks of, say, Garth Brooks, she will be exercising a particular MOP of the country star; for example, a MOP entertainment of which requires (among other things) thinking of Garth as a striped-shirt wearing country singer, or a cowboy-hat wearing guy Barbara Walters interviewed on Memorial Day weekend, or the guy with the bolero tie she is currently looking at, or the person who sang ‘Ropin’ the Wind’, and so on. Even in the absence of a full story regarding the nature of MOPs, it is extremely doubtful that I will, in any sense, know the particular Garth-presenting MOP Gwen is employing in the belief I report in uttering (7):

(7) Gwen believes that Garth Brooks is cute.

At best, I know something regarding the type of MOP she is employing.

It would be a mistake to think that Schiffer’s worry for the Fregean is simply that I am “not in a position to refer” to a MOP-containing proposition with (7)’s that-clause because I have limited knowledge of the fine details of the cognitive facts concerning Gwen. Crucially, even if I knew the relevant MOP Gwen is employing in her Garth-belief, I would not be in a position to refer to it, or in any sense make it manifest to my audience, in the course of uttering (7). The reason for this is that what a speaker can refer to in making an utterance u is constrained by what she can reasonably expect her audience to grasp on the basis of u. As Schiffer writes:

Meaning entails audience-directed intentions, and one cannot mean something without intending to be

7. See the citations in footnote 3.
understood. Part of meaning that such and such is intending one’s audience to recognize that that is what one meant, and — a corollary — part of referring to a thing is intending one’s audience to recognize that reference. [Schiffer 1993, pp. 109–10]

This is extremely plausible. A speaker’s meaning, or intending to communicate, that $p$ to an audience $A$ by uttering $u$ (minimally) requires that, in uttering $u$, she intends that $A$ entertain that $p$, at least in part, on the basis of the fact that she uttered $u$. Correlatively, a speaker’s referring to an object $x$ by uttering $t$ (minimally) requires that the speaker utter $t$ (or a larger construction in which $t$ occurs) with the intention that her audience come to entertain a thought which is about or concerns $x$, at least in part, on the basis of the fact that she uttered $t$.

Returning to our case of (7), I simply have no reason whatsoever to suppose that my utterance could put my audience in a position to recognize any particular MOP of Garth that Gwen is employing in her belief. Even if we suppose that, as a matter of fact, I know that of all the different ways an agent can think of Garth, Gwen is employing the Garth-presenting MOP$_{117}$, how could I possibly expect my audience to recognize my intention to refer to this particular MOP on the basis of my utterance of (7)? If the Fregean theory of belief-reports were correct, my inability to refer to a particular MOP should — given these facts about communication — preclude me from being able to truly utter (7). But this prediction is absurd.5

8. Certain versions of the Fregean approach — e.g., Kaplan 1968 — take the logical form of (7) to be something like the following:

\[
(\forall x) \exists \alpha (\alpha \text{ presents Garth Brooks to Gwen} \land \text{Bel(Gwen, } <\alpha, m_{\text{being cute},}>))
\]

That is, for some MOP $\alpha$ presenting Garth Brooks to Gwen, Gwen believes the proposition resulting from concatenating $\alpha$ with some MOP of being cute. While this does not block the inferences that worry the Fregean, a simple variation on (7) would do the trick. On this view, the quantifier in (7) is restricted by a contextually definite property of MOPs. But then, the meaning-intention problem just resurfaces at the level of the restriction. In addition, the resulting theory is not a face-value theory; on the current approach, that-clauses do not refer.

Furthermore, note that my audience can perfectly well understand my utterance of (7) even if they know even less than me about the exact MOP relevant to Gwen’s belief. That is, a competent, well-informed audience can understand my utterance even if there is no particular way of thinking of Garth that they take to be relevant to the truth of my utterance. In light of the foregoing discussion of speaker meaning this point should not be surprising. Insofar as understanding a speaker’s utterance (minimally) requires entertaining what the speaker meant by the utterance, it follows that if the speaker meant that $p$ by uttering $u$, then $A$ must entertain that $p$ if he is to understand $u$. In the case of (7), however, it is obvious that there is no particular MOP-involving proposition that one’s audience must grasp in order to understand the utterance. Speakers do not mean — much less literally mean, or state — the kinds of things that the Fregean account of belief reports requires.

Moreover, it is implausible to suppose that the foregoing problem for the Fregean is merely one of referential indeterminacy. In standard cases in which a singular term is referentially indeterminate, there will be multiple candidates for the extension of the term — each candidate being such that the speaker did not definitely refer to it, or definitely fail to refer to it, by her use of the term. Rather, the speaker, in some sense, indeterminately referred to each candidate.9 Accordingly, if it were indeterminate which Fregean proposition I am referring to by my use of ‘that Garth Brooks is cute’ in (7), we would expect there to be a range of candidate Fregean propositions, no one of which I definitely referred to, but each of which I indeterminately referred to. The problem with this suggestion should, however, be clear. In the case of (7), it is extremely difficult to give a single such candidate Fregean proposition that the speaker could have plausibly intended to convey by her use of the that-clause.

This problem extends to Fregean theories of speech-act content. What a speaker literally means in uttering $u$ is something that her
audience must grasp if she is to understand \( u \). Now, suppose I utter (8) while gesturing towards Garth as he walks towards the stage to accept an award for outstanding community service:

(8) He is a country singer.

If the things we mean and say are Fregean propositions, then in uttering (8) there should be some particular MOP-involving proposition I meant; a Fregean proposition my audience must entertain if she is to understand my utterance. There is, however, no such Fregean proposition. Though I will (plausibly) be thinking about Garth under some particular MOP, I do not and, moreover, cannot intend to communicate that MOP to you via my utterance.

So far in our discussion of the meaning-intention problem, we have focused on what a speaker can intend to refer to by her use of a that-clause such as ‘that Garth Brooks is cute’ in an utterance of (7), and, hence, what she can mean, or intend to communicate, by the belief-report in which it occurs. But how, exactly, do these considerations bear on the face-value theorist’s semantic thesis concerning the truth-conditions of literal utterances of the form ‘S believes that \( p \)?’

More specifically, why should we follow Schiffer in thinking that this fact — that a belief-reporter uttering, say, ‘Gwen believes that Fido is a dog’ isn’t ‘in a position to refer to any particular mode of presentation’ that Gwen has for either Fido or doghood — shows that the (token) that-clause does not make context-dependent reference to a mode-of-presentation-containing proposition?

As we saw above, it is implausible to suppose that that-clauses are conventionally associated with particular Fregean propositions. Hence, the Fregean theorist will (or at least should) claim that virtually all that-clauses are semantically complex, context-sensitive devices for referring to MOP-containing propositions. That is, the Fregean should claim that (typically) the context-invariant meanings of the components of a that-clause, and the syntactic arrangement thereof, will constrain, but fail to fully determine what a speaker literally referred to in uttering it on a particular occasion.\(^{10}\) Something must bridge the gap between what is given by the (complex) context-invariant meaning of the that-clause (qua, expression type), and what (if anything) it refers to on a particular occasion of use. For now, the crucial point is that it is extremely difficult to see what this further something could be other than the meaning-intentions (including the referential intentions) of the belief-ascriber.\(^{11}\)**

Insofar as a well informed, competent speaker uttering (7) cannot mean, or intend to communicate, a proposition compatible with the Fregean version of the face-value theory, it is implausible to suppose that she can literally mean, or state, any such proposition either. And since the truth-conditions of a speaker’s utterance \( u \) are determined by what she stated in producing \( u \), the meaning-intention problem directly challenges the Fregean version of the face-value view.

I submit that even if Fregean propositions are among the things we believe, they are poorly suited to be the things we mean and say, or the things to which we refer in using that-clauses in belief-reports.

2.2 The Problem Generalized

This conclusion might initially seem like a welcome result for face-value theorists, such as Russelians, who would like to eliminate MOPs from the semantics of belief-reports.\(^{12}\) For example, nothing in our discussion so far casts doubt on the idea that my utterance of, say, (4) is true just in case I stand in the belief relation to the Russellian proposition referred to by its that-clause. In fact, it is plausible to hold that I

\(^{10}\) Compare: the context-invariant meaning of a complex demonstrative such as ‘that painting’, will constrain, but fail to determine, what a speaker literally refers to in using it.

\(^{11}\) In the next section, as well as in Section 3, we will return to the issue of what other than — or more plausibly, in addition to — the belief-ascriber’s meaning-intentions might be relevant to the determination of that-clause reference.

\(^{12}\) But note that this result is also unwelcome for those Russelians who want to appeal to MOPs in the pragmatics of belief reports. The reason for this is simple: if you can’t mean a MOP-involving proposition by uttering ‘S believes that \( p \)’ then you can’t implicate one either, at least supposing that a speaker’s implicating \( p \) by \( u \) entails that she meant \( p \) by \( u \).
am in a position to refer to a singular Russellian proposition by my use of the that-clause. (Likewise, I see no difficulty in holding that in uttering, for example, (2) the speaker is in a position to state, or say, a singular proposition as well).

While it is plausible to hold that speakers sometimes refer to Russellian propositions by that-clauses, it will suffice to refute all Russellian versions of the orthodox view to show that there are examples of true belief-reports in which this cannot be the case. Remember, such theorists hold that a (token) belief-report is true just in case the subject of the attribution believes the Russellian proposition held to be referred to by the relevant that-clause. We are about to see, however, that Russellian accounts fail even to provide necessary conditions for the truth of belief-reports. The meaning-intention problem is thus not just a problem for Fregeans.

Consider the following example. While preparing for their first party at their new off campus apartment, Chet and Tim go out to buy supplies for the night. Chet and Tim decide that their guests are too sophisticated to drink domestic beer from a keg. Instead they opt to buy several cases of imported beer that they will serve from a large ice-filled bucket in their backyard, which—keeping with the “pirate” theme of their party—they have hand-decorated with a skull-and-crossbones motif.

Shortly before the party is to begin Tim says to Chet, ‘I could really use a beer.’ An already tipsy Chet ponders the question for a moment, and responds: ‘Ummm. Oh yeah, I believe that every beer is in the bucket.’ Consider (9), as uttered by Chet on that occasion:

(9) I believe that every beer is in the bucket.

I claim that in this case, though the belief report is true, and Tim perfectly well understands the attribution, there is no particular Russellian proposition that the that-clause can be plausibly taken as referring to.

First, note that insofar as Chet is being claimed to believe something in (9), it is not plausibly something that would be made false by the fact that (a) there are numerous bottles of beer nowhere near Chet and Tim's apartment, and (b) there is more than one plastic bucket in the world. Of course, the Russellian would agree, pointing out that the that-clause in (9) is context sensitive, owing to the context sensitivity of its parts—in particular, the quantifiers ‘every beer’ and ‘the bucket’.

Relative to the Russellian view, we can think of the context-invariant meaning of the sentence embedded in the that-clause, as a propositional template (momentarily suppressing the further semantic structure of the quantifier ‘the bucket’):

\[
\text{TEMP } <<<\text{Beer, _____}, \text{In-the-bucket}>, \text{EVERY}>.
\]

We can think of TEMP as what Kent Bach has called a propositional radical. In this case we can think of this propositional radical as a

15. Recall from our discussion in Section 1, that in those cases where the relevant that-clause is context sensitive, the Russellian will claim that the reference of the (token) that-clause will be determined as a function of its syntax, and the semantic values of its parts in the context of utterance. Hence, in order to find a plausible candidate for the proposition referred to by the that-clause in (9) (if such there be), the Russellian will need to tell us how the quantifiers ‘every beer’ and ‘the bucket’ are to be restricted in the context of utterance.


17. See Bach 2001 for a helpful discussion of propositional radicals. For those familiar with Bach's numerous papers on the semantics/pragmatics distinction, and the nature of 'what is said', it will be clear just how deeply indebted I am to his work in what follows. In his 2001 piece, Bach plausibly argues that (now) familiar considerations concerning semantic underspecification and context sensitivity push us towards the view that 'what is said' should not always assume to be a proposition; rather, in some cases, what is said is just a propositional radical. However, in this paper (and other related papers on the topic), Bach works with 'the plausible assumption that what a speaker means must be a complete proposition', even in those cases where the semantic content of the speaker's utterance is a propositional radical (ibid., p. 20). In Buchanan 2010, I argue that the kinds of considerations that motivate Bach's

13. Here I borrow from Buchanan 2010, in which I discuss the related question of whether the things we mean and say are propositions.

14. An anonymous referee suggests that for some speakers the response in (9) is somewhat stilted. While the report as given in the text is perfectly fine in my own idiolect, perhaps some speakers would prefer 'I believe all the beer is in the bucket'.
property of Russelian propositions — a property instantiated by those
Russelian propositions we can construct from it by filling the gap ‘__’
with an appropriate contextually provided property. The Russelian
face-value theorist will then claim that the speaker uttering (9) is
referring to a Russelian proposition that is a contextually relevant
completion of that template if she is speaking literally.

The problem with this suggestion, however, is that when we
search for a contextually relevant Russelian proposition with a do-
main restriction attaching to ‘every beer’, we quickly find that there
are numerous, non–truth-conditionally equivalent “candidates” spring to mind:

  every beer **we bought at the bodega** is in the bucket
  every beer **we will serve at the party** is in the bucket
  every beer **for our guests** is in the bucket
  every beer **at the apartment** is in the bucket

Let’s label these candidates, which are all completion of the template
TEMP, ‘P₁…P₄’. No doubt, there are numerous other possibilities as
well. In typical real-life examples in which speaker and audience have
even a small stock of mutual knowledge there will be many relevant
but non–truth-conditionally equivalent candidates. Moreover, further
candidates will emerge in the case of (9) if, following Russell, we treat
the description quantificationally — e.g. **the bucket by the hot tub**, **the
bucket in the backyard**, **the bucket decorated in pirate motif**, **the bucket
filled with ice**, etc.

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view that what is said need not be a proposition also push us towards also
giving up this widely accepted assumption concerning speaker-meaning.

Is it plausible to suppose that in uttering (9) Chet referred to any
particular one of these candidates? No: in order for Chet to have
referred to any particular one of the candidates to the exclusion of
the others, he would have to have uttered (9) intending for his audi-
ence to recognize that he referred to, say, P₁, rather than any other of
the candidates. But Chet cannot reasonably be held to have such a
meaning-intention. Even if Chet, in some sense, “had in mind” just
one of the candidates, we could not reasonably suppose him to have
intended to make that particular candidate manifest to his audience
by uttering (9).

This fact is, I think, reinforced when we consider the situation from
the perspective of Chet’s audience, Tim. In typical cases in which a
speaker literally utters a sentence containing a referring expression,
his audience must (minimally) come to entertain a thought concern-
ing the referent of that expression if she is to understand the utterance.
For example, reconsider (3):

  (3) He is talented.

If I literally utter (3) intending to refer to 50 Cent, then my audience
must come to entertain a thought concerning 50 Cent if she is to un-
derstand my utterance. But notice that, in the case of (9), Tim does not
need to take Chet to have referred to any particular one of the candi-
dates in order to understand the belief-report. No doubt, Tim might
come to associate, say P₉, with Chet’s use of the that-clause, but that
is not required for understanding the report. Intuitively, coming to as-
soicate, say, P₉ with the that-clause would have done just as well.

As with the Fregean, the Russelian theorist’s problems here are in-
timately tied to her account of speech act content. Suppose that in the
same context Chet had instead uttered the un-embedded (10):

  (10) Every beer is in the bucket.

If the account of propositional content currently on offer were cor-
rect, there should be some one (or more) Russelian propositions that
Chet meant, and moreover stated, or asserted. But there is no such
proposition. If, for example, Chet meant \( P_2 \), his audience would have to have entertained it in order to understand the utterance of (10). But, crucially, Chet’s audience could have perfectly well understood the utterance by entertaining some one or more of the other candidates. Of course, nothing here is special about \( P_2 \). Moreover, the same reasoning applies to the other candidates.

How might the Russellian face-value theorist respond? Perhaps she grants that in uttering (9) Chet didn’t refer to any one of the candidates \( P_1 \ldots P_n \) but this just shows that we have not hit upon the right candidate yet. Though no one of the candidates I have mentioned can plausibly be taken to be the semantic value of the that-clause in (9), there is some or other more natural or eligible candidate proposition that will work. But if this is to be anything more than mere wishful thinking, we need to be told what this more eligible candidate might be. The only initially plausible alternative that has been suggested to me on this front is that the relevant proposition is (roughly) all those beers are in the bucket — where ‘those beers’ is taken as a rigid referring expression picking out a certain collection, or plurality, of beer bottles. But there are two significant problems with this suggestion.

We can appreciate the first problem by asking: how, exactly, would the world have to be in order for what Chet claims himself to believe in uttering (9) to be correct? On the suggestion we are now considering, what Chet believes is predicted to be true if, and only if, each

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18. It is genuinely unclear how we should think of ‘naturalness’ in the context of our discussion. In those cases where theorists have plausibly appealed to naturalness as a constraint on reference-determination, we are faced with multiple candidates for the reference of a term, but one candidate is somehow simpler, or more intuitive, than the rest. For example, the plus function is seemingly more natural than the quus function, the property of being green is more natural than the property of being grue, etc. In the cases we have been discussing, however, the appeal to naturalness seems, at best, unhelpful. There seems no sense to the claim that that one of the candidates is more natural, or eligible (in the relevant sense), than the rest.

19. It has been suggested to me that the relevant proposition is simply that every contextually relevant beer is in the contextually relevant bucket. Any initial temptation to take this suggestion seriously is likely due to taking ‘contextually relevant’ to be a stand in for some, or other, particular domain restriction.
as believing will be true just in case each of the propositions indeterminately referred to are themselves true, false if each such proposition is false, and otherwise indeterminate.\footnote{20}{The face-value theorist might, however, have a different suggestion in mind: namely, that what is vague or indeterminate is what the speaker-reference relation is in the first place, but that on any admissible way of making this vague relation more precise the speaker will have sort-of referred to each candidate. She will, however, add that the report given in (9) is true just in case the agent believes each such so-referred-to proposition. But notice that in order to assess this suggestion seriously we would first need to be told exactly what this “sort-of referring” could be such that on any precisification it would emerge that the speaker in fact stands in that relation to each of the candidates. Perhaps some such an account can be given, but regardless, the truth-conditional predictions of this suggestion are identical to that of the view discussed in the text, and hence, problematic for the same reasons.}

In order to assess fully the foregoing suggestion, we would need to be told more concerning how, exactly, we should understand the notion of indeterminate reference at issue. In particular, we would need to be told how the proponent of this suggestion conceives of the reference relation such that this is an indeterminate instance thereof.\footnote{21}{Such a theorist cannot plausibly accept our minimal requirements on the speaker reference and speaker-meaning relations, and claim that in cases such as (9) it is indeterminate whether that relation obtains. That is, she cannot plausibly maintain that, for each candidate, it is not definite the case the speaker referred to it, and not definite the case she didn’t. This claim is dubious for reasons already canvassed. What our earlier discussion suggests is that it is determinately the case that the speaker-reference relation does not obtain between the speaker and any one of the candidates. Consider, say, \(P_v\). If the speaker had referred to \(P_v\), to the exclusion of the other candidates in uttering (9), he’d have to have some reason for supposing that his audience could recognize that reference. But the speaker does not have any such reason, and hence it is determinately the case that he did not refer to \(P_v\) — that is, he definitely did not refer to \(P_v\). The same could be claimed of each of the candidates. Hence, the indeterminate-reference theorist needs some other account of the speaker-reference relation if she is to claim that the relation between our belief-reporter and each of the candidates is an indeterminate instance of that relation. I will leave it to the proponent of the account to tell us what that might be, and will assume, in the text, that “indeterminate-reference” is whatever it needs to be in order to generate supervaluational truth-conditions to associate with the that-clause.}

response, or for that matter, any account that appeals to supervaluationism in order to find “the truth-conditions” of the presumed referent of the that-clause. We can appreciate this problem by revisiting the question raised a moment ago: how, exactly, would the world have to be in order for the belief Chet attributes to himself in (9) to be true? Suppose that \(P_v \ldots P_4\) are in fact exhaustive of the candidates. Even on this assumption, we should not accept the supervaluationist’s suggestion that Chet’s belief is true (false) just in case each of \(P_v \ldots P_4\) are true (false), and that his belief is indeterminate in truth-value if only some of the candidates are true and other are false. Suppose that unbeknownst to Chet, Tim has a secret stash of bottled beer (bought some time ago) hidden away in his closet that he has no intention of telling Chet about, or serving at the party. In this scenario, though \(P_v \ldots P_3\) are true, \(P_4\) is false. Contrary to the current suggestion, Chet’s belief could, I claim, nevertheless be true in this scenario, rather than either false or indeterminate in truth-value — the falsity of \(P_4\) notwithstanding. Alternatively, it seems to me that if just one of the candidates, say \(P_4\), were true, and the others false, we would take the belief-report in (9) to be clearly false, rather than merely indeterminate in truth-value. Insofar as the indeterminacy theorist is hoping to cobble together something we can identify as the truth-conditions of what Chet believes, we should be skeptical.

We might, of course, give sufficient conditions for the truth (falsity) of Chet’s belief: his belief is true if each of the candidates is true, and false if each of them are false. But I submit there is no such thing as the truth-conditions of his belief.\footnote{22}{Prima facie, the following argument is intuitively valid: Chet believes that every beer is in the bucket. Hence, what Chet believes is true if, and only if, every beer is in the bucket. One might, however, reasonably wonder how this could be, if the that-clause in (a) fails to pick out an entity with truth-conditions. In response, first note that we should not uncritically assume that in (b), ‘every beer is in the bucket,’ gives the truth-conditions of what Chet believes. To suppose otherwise would be, in effect, to assume that in (b), ‘every beer is in the bucket’ itself expresses a proposition. The considerations in the text regarding (9) and (10) should already have make this assumption doubtful.}

\(\text{Is Belief a Propositional Attitude?}\)
In cases such as (9), the context-invariant meanings of the words constituting the that-clause, and the communicative intentions of the speaker uttering it, fail to determine any particular proposition—Fregean or Russellian—as the referent of the that-clause. Though we have focused on the case of quantifier domain restriction, the basic problem for these accounts could have just as well been illustrated by belief-reports containing virtually any other context-sensitive construction for which theorists have been tempted to postulate hidden variables in logical form.\(^{23}\)

The argument involving (9) threatens to generalize to the all versions of the face-value account as well. On any theory that is consonant with the semantic thesis, the that-clause in (9) must pick out some or other proposition in order for the belief-report to be true—where, at least minimally, the relevant proposition has a truth-condition. But we have just seen that this claim is problematic. In our case, each of the candidates differs from the others in truth-conditions. Insofar as the speaker’s communicative intentions, together with the standing context-invariant meanings of her words, fail to determine any one of the candidates as the semantic value of the that-clause, they equally fail to determine any unique set of truth-conditions for Chet’s belief as well. If the that-clause in (9) cannot plausibly be associated with any specific set of truth-conditions, it cannot plausibly be associated with a proposition of any stripe. The meaning-intention problem is a challenge to all standard versions of the face-value theory.

In our case of (9), (i) the context-invariant meanings of the that-clauses constituents, (ii) the syntactic arrangement thereof, and (iii) the communicative intentions of the belief-reporter jointly fail to determine a proposition that can plausibly be taken as the referent of the relevant that-clause. While it is, perhaps, possible that some fact other than or in addition to (i)–(iii), might secure a proposition as the referent of the that-clause in such cases, it is extremely difficult to see what this might be. In the next section, I turn to the only plausible alternative account of which I am aware of how the that-clause reference is determined.

3. A Pleonastic Alternative?

If the foregoing considerations are correct, something has to give. Either we should reject the semantic thesis (and hence the face-value account) or we should find an alternative account of the determination of that-clause reference not subject to the meaning-intention problem. Minimally, such an alternative would have to allow that a token that-clause such as ‘that every beer is in the bucket’ can be used to refer to a proposition despite the fact that (i) it makes no context-independent reference to a proposition, and (ii) the speaker using it cannot herself make context-dependent reference to a particular proposition by using it.

My own preference is to pursue the former option, if for no other reason than that (a) the (broadly) Gricean principles concerning meaning and reference upon which the meaning-intention problem turns are plausible, and (b) I am unaware of any plausible alternative account of that-clause reference that would clearly be of help. If, as in (9), the standing context-invariant meanings of the that-clause’s components fail to provide us with a proposition that we can plausibly identify as the referent of the that-clause, something must come in to take up the slack. What could this extra something be other than the communicative (in particular, referential) intentions of the speaker using the that-clause?

\(^{23}\) See Stanley 2000, and the subsequent literature it spawned, for numerous examples of such constructions.
A potential answer to this question is offered in Schiffer (2003). Schiffer makes an extended case for a novel development of the face-value account, on which propositions are claimed to be extremely fine-grained, unstructured entities — what he calls pleonastic propositions. A large part of his positive case in favor of pleonastic propositions turns on the role that these entities can play in the explanation of numerous vexing issues in the philosophy of language, including the analyses of conditionals, vagueness, and evaluative discourse. I refer the reader to Schiffer’s book for the details of his positive account and the full defense thereof. In what follows, I’d like briefly to discuss a few comments Schiffer makes on the topic of the determination of that-clause reference that bear directly on the dilemma at hand.

While Schiffer accepts that that-clauses are indeed singular terms the semantic values of which are propositions, he claims that “the relation between that-clauses and the propositions to which they refer is importantly different from the usual relation between singular terms and their referents” (2003, 72). Schiffer suggests that this crucial difference between that-clauses and other singular terms can be illustrated by comparing cases such as the following:

Case 1  There is some particular person Ralph has in mind — namely, Jane — such that Ralph wants to tell Alice that Jane is admired by Harold. In a context in which Jane is salient, Ralph says ‘Harold admires her’, intending his utterance of ‘her’ to refer to Jane.

Case 2  There is some particular proposition Ralph has in mind — namely, … [?]… — such that Ralph wants to tell Alice that Harold believes that proposition. In a context in which the proposition is salient, Ralph says ‘Harold believes that Claudia Schiffer teaches philosophy at NYU’, intending his utterance of ‘that Claudia Schiffer teaches philosophy at NYU’ to refer to that proposition. [2003, 80]

As Schiffer points out, although it is easy to imagine cases that exemplify Case 1, it is not so easy to think of cases on a par with Case 2. Part of the problem here is that, if we assume that propositions are fine-grained (as Schiffer is assuming at this point in his discussion), it is difficult to see how to fill out the ellipsis in Case 2, because it is difficult to find a plausible candidate that-cause that has a context-independent reference, and “our context can’t generate the same context as Ralph’s imagined utterance” (ibid.). The deeper problem is the one we explored in our discussion of Fregean propositions in section 2.1: namely, that “imagining oneself in Ralph’s position, it is difficult to find in oneself referential intentions that would determine a particular one of the that-Claudia-Schiffer-teaches-philosophy-at-NYU propositions” (2003, 81). If propositions are fine-grained, there will be infinitely many that-Claudia-Schiffer-teaches-philosophy-at-NYU propositions, and it is doubtful that anything about Ralph’s communicative, and referential, intentions will discriminate between them.

But what moral should we draw from the disanalogy between Cases 1 and 2? Assuming that that-clauses are indeed referential singular terms, should we conclude that that-clauses cannot be taken as referring to fine-grained propositions, or should we conclude that the referent of a token that-clause is not determined by the context-invariant meanings of its parts, and the communicative intentions of the speaker using it? Schiffer opts for the latter, claiming that:

In the utterance of a that-clause in a belief-report...the speaker does not have a conscious, or even unconscious, referential intention, and consequently no such intention helps to determine the proposition to which a given utterance of a that-clause refers. (2003, 81)

Rather, the proposition to which the relevant that-clause refers is determined by what he calls “contextually-determined criteria of evaluation” operative in the context — roughly, “what the speaker and hearer...
mutually take to be essential to the truth-value of the report” (2003, 80). If, for example, both speaker and hearer would take the belief report ‘Harold believes that Claudia Schiffer teaches philosophy at NYU’ to be false if Harold were unacquainted with the name ‘Claudia Schiffer’, “then that is an individuating feature of the proposition to which the that-clause refers” (2003, 81).

On the basis of this perceived difference between that-clauses and other singular terms, such as names and demonstratives, Schiffer suggests an inversion of the simple picture naturally suggested by the claim that ‘believes’ expresses a two-place relation between agents and propositions referred to by that-clauses. Consider a simple relational claim involving paradigmatic referring expressions, such as an utterance of (11):

(11) Tim likes him.

In order to evaluate whether (11) is true, we first need to determine what the singular terms are being used to (literally) refer to, and then determine whether the things so referred to stand in the relation expressed by ‘likes’. In Schiffer’s terms, the determination of the referents of the relevant singular terms in (11) fix, at least partially, “the criteria for truth-evaluating the utterance” (2003, 74). According to Schiffer, however, the foregoing story does not apply in cases of belief reports. Consider (12):

(12) Harold believes that Claudia Schiffer teaches philosophy at NYU.

We don’t evaluate the utterance of (12) by first determining the proposition referred to by the that-clause, and the relevant bearer of the name ‘Harold’ and then checking whether the former indeed stands in the belief relation to the latter. Rather:

[W]e first have the contextual determination of the criteria for truth-evaluating the utterance, and it is these criteria which determine the referent of the that-clause, and thereby (at least in part) the proposition asserted by the entire belief report…. The key to this is that the referent of the belief report’s that-clause isn’t a factor in determining the contextually determined criteria of evaluation but is itself determined by those criteria. [2003, 74–75]

The relevant “criteria of evaluation” will themselves be determined, in part, by “the communicative interests of the speaker and hearer” together with the semantic properties of the expressions comprising the that-clause, and these criteria in turn, “as though as an afterthought” determine the proposition referred to by the that-clause (ibid.).

Ultimately, the picture of propositional content that emerges is one on which “the propositions we believe enjoy no more intrinsic conditions of individuation than those provided by their truth-conditions and the requirements for believing those propositions that are determined by the criteria for truth-evaluating belief reports in which reference is made to them (2003, 86; emphasis added).

In effect, Schiffer has offered us a two-stage account of the determination of that-clause reference. In the first stage, the context-invariant meanings of the words in a belief report such as (12) and the “communicative interests” of speaker and hearer jointly determine a “criterion of evaluation” for the report that, in turn, determines the proposition expressed by the report as a whole. In the second stage, we then, as it were, reverse engineer what the that-clause must refer to given what is expressed by the report as a whole.

While I am sympathetic to many aspects of Schiffer’s account, I remain unconvinced. To be clear, we should not worry whether Schiffer’s strategy for determining the referent of the that-clause will ever lead us astray. Given the way in which the referent of a token that-clause is reverse engineered from what is expressed by the belief-report in which it occurs, we are guaranteed to get the right result. What I doubt is that the envisaged process will always give us an entity with truth-conditions.

More specifically, I doubt that Schiffer’s proposal will be of any help to the face-value theorist regarding cases such as (9). In that case, there
simply is no good reason to think that the facts concerning the standing context-invariant meanings of the words uttered, in tandem with Chet and Tim’s shared communicative interests, will be rich enough to provide the needed resources to determine a proposition of any stripe — pleonastic or otherwise — to be the referent of the that-clause. If the facts about Chet — including his meaning-intentions and his beliefs about the contextual common ground between him and Tim — fail to be rich enough to determine a proposition as the referent of the that-clause in (9), it cannot possibly help to bring in facts concerning Chet’s audience. After all, those facts concerning the context that Chet and Tim mutually take to be essential to the truth of the report will be a subset of those things our speaker, Chet, takes to be so relevant. Hence, if the latter set of facts, in tandem with the context-invariant meanings of the words in the belief-reporting sentence, fails to determine a proposition to associate with the that-clause, then so too will the former.

More generally, I worry that Schiffer has thrown out the baby with the bathwater. A large part of the motivation for all face-value accounts, including Schiffer’s own version, is that they comport nicely with certain platitudes concerning belief-reports — for example, that if I believe that I live in Austin, Texas, then there is something I believe, etc. It is, however, a platitude that in typical communicative exchanges involving reports of the form ‘S believes that p’, the belief-ascriber is intending to tell her audience what S believes, and that the speaker’s audience understands the report only if she recognizes what the speaker said S believes. It is very difficult to see how we can square such platitudes with Schiffer’s claim that “in the utterance of a that-clause in a belief-report … the speaker does not have a conscious, or even unconscious, referential intention” (ibid.).

While it is possible that such platitudes might have to be given up in the course of subsequent theorizing, other things being equal, we should prefer accounts that can be squared with them. Before adopting Schiffer’s proposal, we should first consider another alternative — namely, that belief-reporters intend, and are typically understood as having intended, to refer to something an agent believes when uttering that-clauses, even if this something is not itself a proposition.

4. Is Belief a Propositional Attitude?

If the considerations in the last two sections are correct, the meaning-intention problem calls the semantic thesis, and, hence, the face-value theory, into question. But where does the foregoing discussion leave us with regard to the question of whether belief is a propositional attitude?

We have been assuming, with the face-value theorist, that that-clauses are referential singular terms. The foregoing critical discussion does not yet challenge this working assumption, nor should it. It remains plausible that a speaker literally uttering a report of the form ‘S believes that p’ is intending to tell her audience what S believes, and that the speaker’s audience understands the report only if she recognizes what the speaker said S believes. What is not plausible is the claim that in a true belief-report the referent of a that-clause must be a proposition — Fregean, Russellian, pleonastic, or otherwise. Given our working assumption, the failure of the semantic thesis forces (at minimum) a revision of the metaphysical thesis that the mental states that realize our beliefs are propositional attitudes. If, in our case of (9), the that-clause is being used to refer to something Chet believes, but this “something” is not a proposition, it follows that the metaphysical thesis is false. At a minimum, then, it is misleading to classify belief as a propositional attitude and leave things at that. Even if propositions are among the relata of the belief relation, we need additional non-propositional entities as well.

But what might these non-propositional objects of belief be? In the remainder of this section, I would like to briefly make some speculative remarks regarding how we might answer this question.

According to orthodox accounts, propositions are claimed to be (i) the objects of our beliefs, (ii) the referents of that-clauses, and (iii) the contents of our speech acts. In the foregoing we have been focusing on (i) and (ii), but in order to make progress on the question at hand it will be helpful for us briefly to turn our attention to (iii).
I’ve argued (in Section 2) that the meaning-intention problem for Fregean and Russellian face-value theorists is intimately connected to their respective accounts of speech act content. The claim that the that-clause in (9) refers to a proposition is no more, or less, plausible than the claim that Chet meant, or asserted, a particular proposition in uttering (10) in the same context:

(10) Every beer is in the bucket.

Even if Chet had some particular proposition “in mind” in uttering (10) or the that-clause in (9), he cannot reasonably expect to make it manifest to his audience by way of his utterance: he cannot mean that proposition by uttering (10), or refer to it in the course of uttering (9). But in uttering, say, (10) Chet presumably had some communicative goal. That is, it remains plausible that in uttering (10) Chet meant something, even if this something can’t itself be a proposition. If we could give an account of the sort of thing Chet might have meant in uttering (10), we would, then, have an account of the kind of entity to which Chet referred in uttering the that-clause in (9).

Earlier I suggested that associated with the sentence-type of which (10) is a token is the propositional template TEMP. This propositional template can be thought of as a proposition-type — in effect, a property that is instantiated by the propositions that can be “constructed” from it. If we were merely interested in the context-invariant meaning of (10), or for that matter the that-clause in (9), we could, I submit, plausibly stop here. But our interest is in the more vexing question of what the token that-clause in (9) might possibly be referring to.

Given their shared linguistic competence, both Chet and Tim will, in some sense, “associate” TEMP with both the sentence-type of which (10) is a token, and the that-clause in (9). Moreover, it is plausible that Chet will rely on this mutual knowledge in meaning what he does when uttering either (9) or (10). In both cases, Chet hands TEMP to his audience, Tim, with the expectation that he, Tim, will be able to construct some or other completion. As I suggested earlier, not just any completion will do: Chet will have, and will be recognized as having, certain vague preferences that rule out, for example, every beer at the golf course is in Tiger Woods’s bucket, but which allow in the candidates $P_1, \ldots, P_n$.

But the question remains: what is it that Chet meant in uttering (10)? Elsewhere, I have explored the possibility that the kind of thing Chet literally meant in uttering (10) is what I call a restricted proposition-type — in this case, an entity that we can provisionally think of as the gappy structure provided by TEMP, together with a vague range of restrictions on how that structure is to be completed. In the case at hand, the relevant proposition-type might be that proposition-type $\Psi$ instantiated by all and only those propositions constructible from TEMP which are (i) true in the actual world if a certain collection of beer bottles is in a certain bucket and are (ii) by Chet’s lights relevant to Tim’s recognition of his further aim, namely, to let Tim know where he can find a bottle of beer. On this suggestion, the object of Chet’s communicative intentions is not a proposition but rather a property of propositions. Chet’s utterance is “associated” with many non-truth conditionally equivalent propositions — namely, those propositions that are of the intended (restricted) type or, equivalently, that possess the intended property. Further, there is no proposition that Chet means, nor is there any one proposition that Tim must entertain in order to understand his utterance: Tim’s entertaining any one, or more, of the propositions of the relevant type (on the basis of Chet’s utterance) will suffice for understanding, and thus for communicative success. (In what follows, I’ll drop the qualification ‘restricted’ and simply speak of ‘proposition-types’.)

While the foregoing is just a brief sketch of a positive view, it should (I hope) be clear why such a view regarding the things we mean is potentially an improvement over standard accounts according to which speaker meaning is a propositional attitude, and successful communication requires the speaker’s audience to entertain the proposition(s) the speaker meant. There are cases, such as that of (10), in which successful communication occurs despite the fact that the speaker’s communicative

intentions exhibit a non-specificity and indifference that precludes us from plausibly identifying any particular proposition, or set of propositions, as what he meant, or stated, by the utterance. If, however, (i) what is meant is a proposition-type and (ii) what is required for understanding is (roughly) entertaining some one or more propositions of that type, rather than some one specific proposition, then we can capture the fact that an utterance might be understood in non-equivalent, yet equally correct ways.

The general hope is that proposition-types can be individuated in such a way as to simply “absorb” all of the non-specificity and indifference characteristic of the speaker’s communicative intentions in cases such as (10). While it remains intuitive that in uttering (10), Chet indeed meant something, he did not, and cannot have reasonably, intended to communicate any particular completion of TEMP. But, crucially, this is not to say that Chet does not have communicative intentions, and corresponding preferences and expectations, regarding how his utterance to be understood. (Indeed, it is our sensitivity to these very factors that allows us to distinguish between “candidate propositions” and non-candidates.) On the basis of the factors, we can (hopefully) determine the relevant restrictions on the range of ways in which TEMP might be admissibly completed in the context of utterance. Insofar as the exact contours of these expectations, and preferences, of the speaker are vague, so too are the relevant restrictions on how TEMP might be completed. Though Chet’s communicative intentions cannot determine any particular completion of TEMP, the suggestion is that they can determine some constraints on how TEMP might be completed, and therewith a proposition-type.

If proposition-types can plausibly be taken to be the things we mean, then they offer some promise of being the referents of that-clauses as well. In uttering (9), Chet meant something, and it is plausible that in uttering (9) he is reporting himself to believe that very thing. On the suggestion at hand, the belief-report in (9), then should be taken as expressing a two-place relation between Chet and the proposition-type Ψ.

How exactly this suggestion is developed will depend upon (i) one’s favored conception of proposition-types (e.g., are they properties of Russellian propositions, Fregean propositions, etc.?), and (ii) one’s favored account of what it is to believe a proposition-type. For example, a theorist who sympathizes with the Salmon-inspired Russellian account sketched in Section One might be inclined to offer the following account of what it is to believe a proposition-type Φ:

\[ \text{BEL}^* \text{Necessarily}[(\text{Believes}(x, \Phi)) \iff (\exists p)(\exists m)(\Phi p \& [\text{BEL}(x, p, m)])] \]

where ‘p’ ranges over Russellian propositions. This is, however, just one possible view among many that proposition-type theorists might pursue at this point.

Of course, even if we can provide a satisfying story concerning what it is to believe a proposition-type, numerous further questions remain. In light of the considerations that have led us to this point, the most pressing such question is whether (in the relevant cases) the meaning-intentions of the speakers can, in tandem with context-invariant meanings of the uttered sentence (or that-clause), succeed in determining a proposition-type. While I think that there are some grounds for optimism on this front, we cannot be confident that we have a viable response to the meaning-intention problem in the absence of a worked out account of the individuation, and determination, of proposition-types.

To reiterate, my aim in this section has been simply to motivate the need for non-propositional objects of belief, and to say just a bit about what these entities might be like. Thus, I will be pleased enough if the foregoing speculative remarks concerning proposition-types help to

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25. To reiterate, we need to couple this story regarding the things we mean, and state, with an account of what it is for a speaker’s audience to “grasp” such an entity on the basis of her utterance. So long as we allow (roughly) that the speaker’s audience can “grasp” a restricted proposition-type Ψ on the basis of her utterance via coming to entertain some, or other, proposition of the Ψ-type, there is at least some grounds for hoping that a speaker can indeed intend to communicate Ψ by her utterance.
encourage further debate concerning what the object of a belief might be, if not a proposition.

Conclusion

If we assume, with the face-value theorist, that (i) a speaker literally uttering a report of the form ‘S believes that p’ is intending to tell her audience what S believes, and (ii) that the report is true if, and only if, S believes what the speaker refers to by ‘that p’, then there is considerable pressure to reject the semantic thesis, and with it, the face-value theory.26 Given the problem posed by the meaning-intention problem, there are good reasons to revise the metaphysical thesis so as to allow non-propositional entities to be among the things we believe. While I have suggested that proposition-types might be well suited to play this role, my general claim does not depend on any particular view concerning the non-propositional entities that are among the things we mean and believe.27

26. In Buchanan 2010, I argued that meaning and saying are not propositional attitudes, and worried how, if at all, this conclusion could be squared with the thesis that belief is a propositional attitude. In the conclusion of that paper, I flirted with the idea that we reconcile these claims by opting for a “partial characterization” account of belief-reports on which that-clauses merely characterize, rather than refer to, the propositions we believe (see Bach 1997) for such an account. It is my current view, however, that the account sketched in Section 4 has most of the virtues of such partial characterization accounts, while avoiding the unintuitive claim that, pace Bach, true belief reports don’t do just what they seem to — namely, report what agents believe. In effect, whereas the proponent of Bach’s account would claim that in many belief-reports of the form ‘S believes that p’ the that-clause partially-characterizes a proper ‘content of thought’, the suggestion in Section 4 is that (in effect), in some cases, a that-clause serves to fully-characterizes a partial-content of thought. Adjudicating between the view of belief, and belief-reports, suggested here, and Bach’s account will, however, have to wait until another day.

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