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# *The Content of Propositional Attitudes*

Abstract

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The bare outline of an approach to the semantics of sentences about propositional attitudes will be presented. Here I outline the outline.

We begin by noting some elementary features of sentences about propositional attitudes. Such sentences have the logical form of a relation (at least) between a person, or subject, and something indicated by the nominal expression following the propositional attitude verb. This something admits of truth or falsity, or of being true of some entities and false of others; and it is in terms of these bearers of truth (or bearers of truth-of-ness) that we commonly characterize the subject's mental states. Further, these entities indicated by nominal expressions—what people think, believe and so forth—are normally in the public domain in the sense that they are intersubjectively assessed: so assessing them is a matter of merest routine. A final elementary feature of sentences about propositional attitudes touches logical transformations. In numerous contexts, exchange of co-extensive expressions occurring in surface nominal expressions following propositional-attitude verbs fails to preserve the truth value of the whole sentence. Similarly, normal applications of existential generalization in such expressions often fail at the surface level. On the other hand, these logical transformations, as applied within that-clauses, or variants, intuitively succeed in some contexts.

Frege proposed a theory which goes far toward capturing many of these points. He took propositional attitude sentences to relate a thinker and a thought. That-clauses, and

variants, were terms that indicated or denoted thoughts—abstract entities that were expressed by sentences and were the primary bearers of truth and falsity. The theory captured the intersubjective accessibility of thoughts by claiming that thoughts were abstract and not peculiar to any one thinker. Substantial philosophical problems surround this claim. But from the viewpoint of formal semantical theory, the appeal to abstract entities which people entertain or think in common has great plausibility. Frege's treatment of the failures of substitution and existential generalization in surface that-clauses was one of the chief glories of the theory. Here the theory was guided by a powerful method. Frege postulated that the truth or falsity of a sentence, and the semantical value of a complex term, was a function of the semantical values of its parts, as those parts function in the containing expression. Call this Frege's Principle. Using this principle, the truth value of the sentence embedded in a that-clause can easily be shown not to be the semantical value of the that-clause: embedded sentences with the same truth value are not intersubstitutable. Frege hypothesized that those sentences (or rather the terms formed with those sentences) were denoting a thought. A similar argument applies to existential generalization.

What counts as reference to (denotation of) same or different thoughts is determined in the context of the containing sentence by the method of checking proposed exchanges against Frege's Principle. If an exchange might yield a containing sentence whose truth value is logically independent of the original containing sentence, then the new that-clause refers to a different thought from the old. The same method is, of course, applied to parts of that-clauses. Frege had little to say about contexts in which exchange of co-extensive terms in that-clauses succeeds *salva veritate*. And for reasons I shall skirt, his theory ran into trouble over such cases.<sup>1</sup> But the basic method remains viable even here. Where terms in surface that-clauses occur so that exchange with co-extensive terms is logically guaranteed, those terms have their customary referent—the same one they would have in an identity context. We may speak of a person's believing a thought content of the referred to object. Thought contents of a suitably idealized version of this 'believes of' locution are true of or false of objects to which the subject bears a non-conceptual, quasi-indexical relation. Such thought contents are indexi-

cally infected counterparts of non-indexical thought contents that are true or false *simpliciter*. One's explanation of these "transparent" contexts may appeal to pragmatic or epistemic factors. But the semantical method is independent of one's particular pragmatic or epistemic theory of why transparently occurring terms pick out an object without indicating how the subject thinks about the object. My view is that the method is so attuned to our intuitions about language and so well grounded in powerful semantical principles that no semantical theory which flouts it will be satisfactory.

There are two proto-typical strategies for applying the method. The first may be called the *modality dominated strategy*. Obviously, where 'it is necessary' is applied to simple that-clauses, one never needs to distinguish the semantical contributions of necessarily equivalent expressions occurring in the that-clauses if one's objective is to capture the effects of exchange on truth value. If one thought that modality, logical or metaphysical, were the key to understanding all intensional or oblique contexts, one might try to extend this result to propositional attitude sentences. *Prima facie*, of course, exchanges of necessarily equivalent expressions in that-clauses of propositional attitude sentences can affect truth value. But one might try to idealize or explain this appearance away. There are detailed objections to be made to the variety of proposals along this line. But even apart from these objections, the idealization is clearly quite severe; and its supposed advantages are, in my view, unproved.

A second way of applying the method, Frege's own and the one I favor, might be called the *cognition-dominated strategy*. The idea is to take the most finely discriminated contents one obtains by testing exchanges in that-clauses and use the sort of contents thus individuated in explaining failures of substitution in all contexts. Less fine-grained non-extensional equivalences—including modal equivalences—could then be captured in terms of equivalence relations among the finest-grained contents.

It seems unobjectionable to follow Frege in calling contents thus individuated *thoughts*. But Frege added a pair of further conditions that I find unacceptable. One of these, which I shall return to later, is a metaphysical condition that thoughts are ontologically and conceptually independent of thinkers—in something like the way planets are independent

of observers. The other is that, at least in non-indexical cases, thoughts are what an idealized speaker of the language masters *qua* speaker of the language. The upshot of this view is that synonymous expressions are counted intersubstitutable in the that-clauses of propositional attitudes.

Elsewhere I have argued that this view does not accord with the way exchangeability really works.<sup>2</sup> Exchange of synonyms in that-clauses sometimes fails to preserve truth. Such failures are a symptom of a deeper phenomenon. The phenomenon is that quite a lot of our cognitive lives is carried on despite an incomplete mastery of the notions we think with. It is possible, of course, to deliberately idealize these points away. But again, it seems to me that the supposed theoretical advantages of doing so are quite tenuous. It would be better, I think, to follow up common intuitive observations.

This reasoning leaves us with a view in which the semantical values of that-clauses are approximately as fine-grained as sentences, the linguistic entities themselves. There is still room for idealization here, and I think that considerations involving such phenomena as indexicality and intra-linguistic ambiguity indeed urge certain sorts of idealization. But I shall assume for expository purposes that the semantical values of that-clauses are symbol types, normally (though not always) sentences (open or closed) in the repertoire of the reporter. The contextually appropriate use of a relevant sentence is provided by the following convention: Uses of a propositional attitude verb presuppose that the expressions mentioned in the direct object of the verb (say, in the that-clause) are to be understood as they would be if they were used as an embedded sentence (rather than merely mentioned), at the time of the use of the verb, by the person who uses the relevant token of the containing sentence.<sup>3</sup>

This convention serves to fix the interpretation of the sentence at least as far as it is fixed in actual usage. Its main thrust is that the job done within the Fregean tradition by abstraction (appeal to abstract intensional entities, such as *Gedanken*) is done by context-dependent understanding (by a person at a time) of an exemplar symbol. It is assumed, of course, that understanding is not properly defined or explained in terms of Fregean abstractions. On the other hand, I need not deny that a philosophically illuminating explication of the use and understanding of a sentence must

rely, partly, on appeal to propositional attitudes. Such explication is in my view not to be seen as definitional. Sentence understanding and propositional attitudes are interlocking but primitive notions.

The semantical viewpoint just outlined is not an attempted reduction of propositional attitude sentences to direct discourse. There are substantial differences between the two kinds of locution, signalled by the contrasting behavior of indexicals and by the fact that the former locution does not require that the subject understand the exemplar symbols, or indeed any symbols at all.

The bare idea of taking symbols to be attitude contents is, of course, not new. It dates back to Peirce, and to the early Wittgenstein and Russell, and has been developed in different ways by Carnap, Scheffler, Quine and Davidson. But quite apart from special (and real) difficulties attaching to each of these earlier versions, the general approach has been widely seen as more of a curiosity than a contender. One reason for this is that it has traditionally, but needlessly, been associated with behaviorism or nominalism. Another reason is that the literature is awash with arguments for thinking that no such account could possibly be right: technical objections having to do with quantification, with paradoxes, with embeddings; intuitive objections touching ambiguity, equivalence, and certain ordinary locutions; philosophical objections regarding inexpressibility, self-knowledge, and language learning. Some of these objections are deep and challenging. I favor confronting them rather than accepting them because doing so seems to enrich a viewpoint that has two broad strengths: It involves an application of Frege's method which remains close to ordinary linguistic intuition, combining formal power with empirical sustenance. And it opens a perspective—which I shall not try to develop on this occasion—with a potential for profound insights into our conception of the mental.

I will conclude the presentation by canvassing three of the more interesting objections to taking symbols as attitude contents. The first concerns equivalence. The objection keys on the fact that the same attitude content may often be equally well expressed in different symbols—say, symbols of different languages. I shall sketch a strategy for handling such phenomena by reference to the contextual element in the account I have outlined.

A second objection, which concerns objectivity, takes a variety of forms. A representative version goes as follows. If the account I have proposed takes the content symbols to be construed as we the reporters would use them now, then the truth or falsity of the content depends on the existence of English speakers. But the truth value of many contents is independent of the existence of human agents. Answering this sort of objection in such a way as to steer between unattractive idealisms and Frege's extreme Platonism requires a distinction among different sorts of independence. One must safeguard the independence of truth from minds and at the same time capture the intuition that the primary bearers of truth, propositional attitude contents, presuppose the existence of thinkers.

A third objection features causation. The objection is that our English sentences play no role in the mental lives of dogs or foreigners (there is no causal interaction between subject and alleged content); so such sentences could not be the contents of their propositional attitudes. It is clear, I think, from discourse about shared attitudes that content tokens peculiar to the subject and with which he causally interacts are not explicitly referred to in natural language propositional attitude discourse. So the objection should be seen as urging a metaphysical or scientific reconstruction of natural language. While maintaining that interaction with symbol tokens is integral to our conception of propositional attitudes, I shall raise some questions about whether causal interaction is the proper *model* for even a rational reconstruction of propositional attitudes, much less for an account of the form of natural language.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Cf. my "Belief De Re," *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXIV(1977): 338-62; and "Sinning Against Frege," *The Philosophical Review* LXXXVIII(1979): 398-432.

<sup>2</sup>"Belief and Synonymy," *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXV(1978): 119-38; "Individualism and the Mental" *Midwest Studies* IV(1979): section IIIc.

<sup>3</sup>This convention is formulated and discussed in "Self-Reference and Translation," in Guenther-Reutte and Guenther eds., *Translation and Meaning* (Duckworth Press, 1978).