

Propositional Content

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To a first approximation, *propositional content* is whatever *that-clauses* contribute to what is ascribed in utterances of sentences such as

Ralph believes *that Tony Curtis is alive*.

Ralph said *that Tony Curtis is alive*.

Ralph hopes *that Tony Curtis is alive*.

Ralph desires *that Tony Curtis is alive*.

‘Tony Curtis is alive’ means *that Tony Curtis is alive*.

An account of propositional content is of foundational importance in the theory of linguistic and mental representation, but, as we are about to see, there are widely divergent opinions about what that account should be.

I. The Face-Value Theory of Belief Reports

It is not possible to theorize in any significant way about what *that-clauses* contribute to sentences such as those displayed independently of a consideration of the truth conditions of those sentences and of the contributions their other constituent expressions make to the determination of those truth conditions. For this reason, I shall begin by considering a theory of belief reports which I shall call the *face-value theory*. I call it that because it is a theory which appears well motivated when belief reports are taken at face value, and because the intuitive considerations which *prima facie* support the theory arguably give it the default status of a theory that must be defeated if it is not to be accepted, as is evidenced by the fact that those who have proposed alternative theories have motivated those alternatives by appeal to what they perceived to be problems with the face-value theory. Also, as we are about to appreciate, the face-value theory affords the primary

way of motivating what may well be the currently dominant view—namely, that propositional contents are entities of a kind philosophers call *propositions*.

The face-value theory is about belief reports of the form

(1) *A* believes that *S*,

and it makes two claims: first, that reports of this form are true just in case the referent of the ‘*A*’ term stands in the belief relation to the thing to which the ‘that *S*’ term—the that-clause—refers, and second, that these that-clauses refer to propositions.

The first claim, which implies that (1) consists of a two-place transitive verb flanked by slots for two argument singular terms, is made plausible by its being the most straightforward way of accounting for the apparent validity of inferences like these:¹

Harold believes that there is life on Venus, and so does Fiona.

So, there is something that they both believe—to wit, that there is life on Venus.

Harold believes everything that Fiona says.

Fiona says that there is life on Venus.

So, Harold believes that there is life on Venus.

Harold believes that there is life on Venus.

That there is life on Venus is Fiona’s theory.

So, Harold believes Fiona’s theory.

Harold believes that there is life on Venus.

That there is life on Venus is implausible.

So, Harold believes something implausible—to wit, that there is life on Venus.

These inferences appear to be formally valid, and the most straightforward way of accounting for that formal validity is to represent them, respectively, as having the following logical forms:²

¹ Here and elsewhere in this article I borrow wholesale from Schiffer (2003).

$Fab \ \& \ Fcb$

$\therefore \exists x(Fax \ \& \ Fcx)$

$\forall x(Fax \rightarrow Gbx)$

Fac

$\therefore Gbc$

Fab

$b = d$

$\therefore Fad$

Fab

Gb

$\therefore \exists x(Gx \ \& \ Fax)$

These are the forms the inferences enjoy if, but only if, (1) is composed of a two-place transitive verb flanked by slots for two singular argument terms.

The face-value theory's second claim, that that-clauses refer to propositions, gets its *prima facie* support in the following way. Consider

(2) Ramona believes that eating carrots improves eyesight.

If, as the face-value theory has it, the displayed occurrence of 'that eating carrots improves eyesight' is a singular term, then, obviously, its referent is *that eating carrots improves eyesight*, and, it would seem, we can straightway say the following things about this thing, *that eating carrots improves eyesight*, which is the referent of the that-clause singular term:

- *That eating carrots improves eyesight* is *abstract*: it has no spatial location, nor anything else that can make it a physical object.
- It is *mind- and language-independent* in two senses. First, its existence is independent of the existence of thinkers or speakers.

² In what follows I represent 'Fiona's theory' as a logical singular term, rather than as a Russellian definite description; but nothing turns on this. The validity of the arguments would also be captured if that-clauses were represented as Russellian definite descriptions whose denotations were propositions.

That eating carrots improves eyesight was not brought into existence by anything anyone said or thought. Second, *that eating carrots improves eyesight* can be expressed by a sentence of just about any natural language but itself belongs to no language.

- It has a *truth condition*: *that eating carrots improves eyesight* is true iff eating carrots improves eyesight.
- It has its truth condition *essentially*: it is a *necessary truth* that *that eating carrots improves eyesight* is true iff eating carrots improves eyesight. The contrast here is with sentences. The *sentence* ‘Eating carrots improves eyesight’ is also true iff eating carrots improves eyesight, but that is a *contingent* truth that would have been otherwise had English speakers used ‘carrots’ the way they now use ‘bicycles’.
- It has its truth condition *absolutely*, i. e., without relativization to anything. The contrast is again with sentences. The sentence ‘Eating carrots improves eyesight’ has its truth condition only *in English* or *among us*. There might be another language or population of speakers in which it means that camels snore; but *that eating carrots improves eyesight* has its truth condition everywhere and everywhen.

From all this we may conclude, by an obvious generalization, that things believed are what philosophers nowadays call *propositions*: abstract, mind- and language-independent entities that have truth conditions, and have their truth conditions both essentially and absolutely.

Such is the *prima facie* motivation for the face-value theory. We cannot properly assess it before we are told what account of propositions is to complement it, and on this there are competing views. We also cannot properly assess the face-value theory until we have taken account of the objections to it, and then taken account of the alternative theories that have been proposed in the light of those objections. But first we should look at the various ways in which the face-value theory might be completed.

II. Propositions and the Face-Value Theory

Two philosophers may accept the face-value theory and therefore agree that the things we believe are propositions—abstract, mind- and language-independent entities that have truth conditions, and have their truth conditions both essentially and absolutely—but disagree about the further nature of those propositions. Here is a brief critical survey of some of the options.

Russellian propositions and the face-value theory. This conjunction—call it the *Russellian face-value theory*—is the theory that the face-value theory of belief reports is true and that the propositions to which that-clauses in belief reports refer are so-called *Russellian propositions*. The theory is suggested by J. S. Mill’s theory of proper names;³ it was explicitly held by Bertrand Russell around the time his landmark article “On Denoting” was published in 1905 (which is why the propositions in question are called Russellian); and it, or something close to it, was evidently also held by Gottlob Frege when he published his *Begriffsschrift* in 1879. Russellian propositions are structured entities whose basic components are the objects, properties, and relations our beliefs and assertions might be about. The simplest Russellian propositions are “singular propositions” like the proposition that Tony Curtis is alive, and it is common to represent such propositions as ordered pairs of the form $\langle x, \Phi \rangle$, where such a proposition is true iff x has the property Φ , false otherwise.⁴ Thus, the Russellian proposition that Tony Curtis is alive may be represented by the ordered pair $\langle \text{TC}, \text{the property of being alive} \rangle$, which, necessarily, is true iff Tony Curtis has the property of being alive, where Tony Curtis has the property of being alive iff Tony Curtis is alive. When the face-value theory is

³ Mill (1843).

⁴ See Schiffer (2003: 18-19) for a technical discussion of the general form of Russellian propositions. Note that I said that for the Russellian the proposition that Tony Curtis is alive may be *represented* by the ordered pair $\langle \text{TC}, \text{the property of being alive} \rangle$, not that the proposition *was* that ordered pair. It is merely a matter of arbitrary convention whether the Russellian represents the proposition that Tony Curtis is alive as $\langle \text{TC}, \text{the property of being alive} \rangle$ rather than $\langle \text{the property of being alive}, \text{TC} \rangle$, so if it were claimed that the proposition was identical to an ordered pair, then the Russellian would have to say that it was indeterminate to which of two ordered pairs the proposition was identical. The most sympathetic statement of the Russellian position is that Russellian propositions are *sui generis* abstract objects that may be *represented* by ordered pairs of a certain kind.

supplemented with the claim that the things we believe are Russellian propositions, then the resulting theory represents the logical form of

(3) Ralph believes that Tony Curtis is alive

as

(4) $B^2(\text{Ralph}, \langle \text{TC}, \text{the property of being alive} \rangle)$,

which is just a convenient way of revealing that ‘believes’ in (3) expresses the two-place belief relation, ‘Ralph’ refers to Ralph, ‘that Tony Curtis is alive’ refers to $\langle \text{TC}, \text{the property of being alive} \rangle$, and that, therefore, (3) is true just in case Ralph bears that belief relation to $\langle \text{TC}, \text{the property of being alive} \rangle$.

There are problems with the Russellian face-value theory of belief reports. These problems were first clearly stated in Frege’s “On Sense and Reference,” published in 1892, where he renounced the Russellian face-value theory he formerly held and supplanted it with a theory we will get to presently. Frege positions us to raise two objections to the Russellian face-value theorist’s claim that (4) reveals (3)’s logical form.

(i) Suppose it transpires, for whatever reason, that the intended referent of ‘Tony Curtis’ never existed; there was no one actor who bore that name in any two films (the actor with that name in “Some Like It Hot” was a different actor who very closely resembled, in looks and Bronx accent, the actor of that name who starred in “The Boston Strangler,” and so on). We would not thereby hold that (3) cannot possibly be true; we would think that even if Tony Curtis never existed, Ralph might nevertheless believe that Tony Curtis was alive. We might say

(5) Ralph believes that Tony Curtis is alive, but in fact there never was such an actor—the corrupt studio that produced the films that were supposed to star an actor named ‘Tony Curtis’ had a pool of look-alike actors whom they used interchangeably.

But apparently this is not something the Russellian face-value theorist can allow.

According to her theory—at least as I have represented (4) as its account of (3)’s logical form⁵—if the proper name ‘Tony Curtis’ in (3) and (5) did not refer to a bearer of that

⁵ The reason for the qualification my use of ‘apparently’ hints at is revealed just below, when I explain Russell’s own reaction to the two Fregean objections in question.

name, then the occurrence of the that-clause in both (3) and (5) would fail to refer, and utterances like (3) and (5) could no more be true than could your utterance of ‘Tony Curtis is alive’ if the occurrence of ‘Tony Curtis’ in that sentence failed to refer to anyone. Call this *the problem of empty names*.⁶

(ii) Suppose that Ralph uses the name ‘Tony Curtis’ to refer to the film actor, that he uses the name ‘Bernie Schwartz’ to refer to a person he knew as a child in the Bronx but with whom he lost touch in adolescence, and that, entirely unbeknown to Ralph, one and the same person is the referent of both names in. Now, should Ralph insist

(6) I believe that Tony Curtis is alive, but I don’t believe that Bernie Schwarz is alive [that little nogoodnik, Ralph thinks to himself, probably died of a drug overdose],

we would without hesitation believe what he said—viz., that he believes that Tony Curtis is alive but does not believe that Bernie Schwartz is alive; we certainly would not regard him as making a contradictory statement. But, apparently, none of this can be true if the Russellian face-value theory is true. If, as I suggested, the theory implies that (4) gives the logical form of (3), then it cannot be true that Ralph does not realize that Bernie Schwartz is Tony Curtis, since he does realize that Tony Curtis is Tony Curtis, and the proposition that Bernie Schwartz is Tony Curtis is the very same proposition as the proposition that Tony Curtis is Tony Curtis. And, in the same way, the theory would apparently have it, Ralph’s utterance of (6) cannot be true, since the statement he made in uttering it is the very same statement he would have made had he uttered the explicit contradiction

(7) I believe that Tony Curtis is alive, but I don’t believe that Tony Curtis is alive.

There are three ways a Russellian face-value theorist might respond to the Fregean counterexamples without giving up her view that that-clauses refer to Russellian propositions, although, as we shall see, one of those ways does give up the face-value theory.

⁶ The problem can also arise for non-referring occurrences in that-clauses of other kinds of singular terms, but to keep things as simple as possible I shall present the Russellian’s problem of empty singular terms only with respect to proper names.

Bertrand Russell accepted the Fregean examples as counter-examples to the Russellian face-value theory *as presented above*, but he made a move that allowed him to continue to accept the Russellian face-value theory (i.e. the face-value theory together with the claim that that-clauses in belief reports refer to Russellian propositions). In my initial presentation of the Russellian face-value theory, I assumed that proper names like ‘Tony Curtis’ were genuine referring expressions, or *singular terms*, and I implicitly built that assumption into my initial characterization of theory. If that-clauses refer to Russellian proposition and names are genuine singular terms, then names contribute nothing but their referents to the propositions referred to by the that-clauses in which those names occur and it follows, given the identity of Tony Curtis and Bernie Schwartz, that the proposition that Tony Curtis is alive = the proposition that Bernie Schwartz is alive. This makes clear that the truth of Ralph’s utterance

(6) I believe that Tony Curtis is alive, but I don’t believe that Bernie Schwarz is alive

is not inconsistent with the Russellian face-value theory *per se*, but only with that theory plus the claim that names are singular terms. Russell’s strategy for dealing with the Fregean examples was to give up the claim that ordinary proper names were singular terms. In his groundbreaking paper “On Denoting,” Russell had already argued that definite descriptions—expressions of the form ‘the *F*’—are not singular terms but function so as to make sentences of the form ‘The *F* is *G*’ express general propositions of the form *there is something that is uniquely F and also G*. Russell now avoided the Fregean counter-examples by claiming that ordinary proper names functioned as disguised definite descriptions.

So suppose that in the ongoing examples we take ‘Tony Curtis’ and ‘Bernie Schwartz’ to mean the same, respectively, as ‘the famous actor named “Tony Curtis”’ and ‘the kid I knew years ago in the Bronx named “Bernie Schwartz”’. Then Russell could respond to the two Fregean objections as follows. He could respond to the first objection by saying that

(3) Ralph believes that Tony Curtis is alive
means the same as

(8) Ralph believes that the famous actor named ‘Tony Curtis’ is alive,

and that it is no objection to the Russellian face-value theory that (8) may be true even if there was no famous actor named ‘Tony Curtis’. And he could respond to the second objection by saying that (6) means the same as

(9) I believe that the famous actor named ‘Tony Curtis’ is alive, but I don’t believe that the kid I knew years ago in the Bronx named ‘Bernie Schwartz’ is alive

and that it is no objection to the Russellian face-value theory that (9) may be true.⁷

Most philosophers believe that Saul Kripke demolished Russell’s description theory of names in his enormously influential book *Naming and Necessity*. Kripke raised three objections.

(a) A consequence of Russell’s theory is that the reference of a name n as used by a speaker S is always determined by some definite description S associates with n . Kripke offered the following counterexample to this consequence. The name ‘Kurt Gödel’ may be a name of Kurt Gödel in Ralph’s idiolect even though the only definite description Ralph associates with the name is ‘the person who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic’. Now suppose that it transpires that the man who was Albert Einstein’s friend and whom everyone called ‘Kurt Gödel’ had stolen the proof from a certain Schmidt and published it under his own name. Then the just-mentioned consequence of Russell’s theory implies that the referent of ‘Kurt Gödel’, as Ralph uses that name, must be Schmidt, the person who in fact proved the incompleteness of arithmetic. Yet, Kripke claims, we have a clear intuition that the name ‘Kurt Gödel’ in Ralph’s idiolect would still refer to Kurt Gödel, even though Kurt Gödel does not satisfy the only description Ralph associates with the name.

(b) A second consequence of Russell’s description theory of names is that n cannot be a name of anything for a speaker S if S does not associate any definite description with n that is supposed by S to apply to the bearer of n . Kripke offered counterexamples to that consequence, too. He pointed out, for example, that a person might use the name ‘Richard Feynman’ as a name of the famous physicist Richard Feynman even though all she knows about Feynman is that he was a famous theoretical

⁷ Russell also claimed—as he had to in order to avoid the Fregean objections—that typical uses of pronouns and demonstratives also functioned as disguised definite descriptions. See e.g. Russell (1910a).

physicist who taught at Cal Tech, and thus associates no definite description at all with the name that is capable of fixing the name's reference.

(c) A third consequence of Russell's theory (or at least a consequence of it given Russell's own view of the truth conditions of sentences of the form 'The F is G ') is that if n means the same as 'the F ' for S , then the proposition expressed by ' n is G ' will be true in an arbitrary possible world w just in case in w something is both uniquely F and also G , regardless of whether the F in w is the thing n names in the actual world. For example, suppose that for Jones 'Kurt Gödel' means the same as 'the person who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic', then the proposition that Kurt Gödel died in Princeton would be true in a possible world in which Gödel died somewhere other than Princeton but in which Britney Spears was the person who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic and she died in Princeton. Kripke argued persuasively—some would say he *proved*—that this gets the truth conditions of the propositions expressed by sentences containing names wrong: the proposition that Kurt Gödel died in Princeton is true in any possible world w only if the person who is actually Kurt Gödel died in Princeton in w , regardless of whether or not he proved the incompleteness of arithmetic in w . According to Kripke, proper names are what he called *rigid designators*: they designate the thing they actually designate in every possible world in which they designate anything. What this means is that if a name n refers to x in the actual world, then for any possible world w , the proposition expressed by a sentence S containing n , $S(n)$, is true iff in w x satisfies the condition expressed by $S()$. For example, since 'Kurt Gödel' rigidly designates a certain man, the proposition expressed by 'Kurt Gödel was a hockey player' is true in an arbitrary world just in case in that world the man whose name in the actual world was 'Kurt Gödel' is a hockey player in that world, no matter whether in that world some other person proved the incompleteness of arithmetic. But if Russell's description theory of names were correct, names would not be rigid designators, since Russell's account has the referent of a name in a possible world w be whatever satisfies the definite description that actually fixes the name's reference, and in the typical case that description can be satisfied by different things in different possible worlds. For example, as already noted, if the proposition expressed by 'Kurt Gödel died in Princeton' were the proposition that the person who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic died in Princeton, then in a

possible world in which Britney Spears was the person who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic, ‘Kurt Gödel’, as we use it in the actual world, would refer in that world to Britney Spears, and the proposition expressed by ‘Kurt Gödel died in Princeton’ would be true in that world only if in that world Britney Spears died in Princeton.

None of these objections is conclusive as stated. The first two counterexamples ignore the role that might be played by meta-linguistic descriptions like ‘The person called “Kurt Gödel” by those from whom I acquired that name’, and there are versions of the description theory of names according to which names are rigid designators. I do not, however, believe that any of these responses to Kripke can in the end make any sort of description theory of names plausible. In any case, it is not possible to discuss these responses in this article.⁸

The second way of responding to the Fregean examples without giving up the Russellian face-value theory is a response advanced by such contemporary theorists as David Kaplan, Nathan Salmon, Scott Soames, and David Braun.⁹ These theorists offer a two-pronged argument to show that the Fregean examples are not counterexamples. The first prong argues that the case for the Russellian face-value theory is made compelling by Saul Kripke’s work on proper names and natural kind terms, Hilary Putnam’s work on natural kind terms, and David Kaplan’s work on demonstratives.¹⁰ The second prong argues that the force of the Fregean examples can be explained away. Both prongs have problems. The first prong relies mostly on two claims that are taken to be established: that the description theory of names is false and that names typically function as rigid designators.¹¹ These two claims do indeed seem to be true, but they fall very short of establishing the Russellian face-value theory; they are easily accommodated by any of the other theories we are about to consider. The second prong is equally problematic. The theorists in question disagree among themselves as to how best to explain away our Fregean intuitions, and there is I believe a systematic objection to all their attempts based on a difficulty they encounter in attempting to explain how one can rationally believe and

⁸ See e.g. Loar (1976) and Stanley (1997).

⁹ Kaplan (1978, 1989); Salmon (1986, 1989, 1995, forthcoming); Soames (2002); and Braun (1998).

¹⁰ Kripke (1980); Putnam (1975a); and Kaplan (1978, 1989).

¹¹ These theorists would make the same claim, *mutatis mutandis*, about other ostensible singular terms such as pronouns and (at least) single-word demonstratives (‘this’, ‘that’, etc.), but to keep things simple, I am restricting attention to proper names.

disbelieve one and the same proposition. According to the Russellian face-value theorist who recognizes that proper names are singular terms, it is true (pretending the Superman story to be fact) that Lois Lane rationally believes both that Superman flies and that Superman does not fly. This is so because she rationally believes both that Superman flies and that Clark Kent does not fly, and, since Clark Kent = Superman, it follows for this theorist that the proposition that Superman flies = the proposition that Clark Kent flies. The theorist explains Lois's rationality in believing and disbelieving that Superman flies by appeal, in effect, to the Fregean notion of modes of presentation: Lois believes Superman to fly when she thinks of him under a mode of presentation which identifies him as a superhero who goes about in a caped spandex outfit and she believes Superman not to fly when she thinks of him under a mode of presentation which identifies him as a nerdy bespectacled newspaper reporter, and this is possible because she does not realize that the two modes of presentation are modes of presentation of the same person.

The problem is that this explanation does not generalize to cover the theory's commitment to its being the case that *you*, who are in the know about Superman/Clark Kent, rationally believe both that Lois realizes that Superman is Superman and that Lois does not realize that Superman is Superman. You rationally believe this because you rationally believe both that Lois realizes that Superman is Superman and that Lois does not realize that Clark Kent is Superman, and, for the theorist in question, the proposition that Superman is Superman = the proposition that Clark Kent is Superman. But we cannot explain your rationally believing and disbelieving the same proposition by appeal to the fact that you have two modes of presentation of Superman/Clark Kent which you fail to realize are modes of presentation of the same person. You, being completely in the know, do not have two such modes of presentation. Anyway, this is what I take to be the core of one compelling objection to the Russellian face-value theory on the assumption that names are singular terms.¹²

The third way a Russellian face-value theorist might respond to the Fregean counterexamples without giving up her view that that-clauses refer to Russellian propositions entails accepting that the type-(ii) counterexamples (e.g. (6)) are counterexamples and giving up the face-value theory. I allude to what I have elsewhere

¹² See Schiffer (forthcoming) and the replies of Braun (forthcoming) and Salmon (forthcoming).

called the *hidden-indexical theory of belief reports*.¹³ This is probably the only sane option for a theorist who wants an account of the semantics of

(1) *A* believes that *S*

according to which substitution instances of ‘that *S*’ refer to Russellian propositions and at least certain Fregean intuitions about the truth-values of belief reports are respected, so that, for example, nothing prevents

(6) I believe that Tony Curtis is alive, but I don’t believe that Bernie

Schwarz is alive

from being true, notwithstanding that the proposition that Tony Curtis is alive = the proposition that Bernie Schwarz is alive. The hidden-indexical theory holds, first, that that-clauses in sentences of form (1) refer to Russellian propositions, and, second, that a literal utterance of (1) states that

(10) For some mode of presentation *m* of the proposition that *S*, *A*

believes that *S* under *m* and *m* is of type Ψ^*

where Ψ^* is some contextually determined type of mode of presentation to which implicit reference is made in the utterance of (1). For example, in uttering ‘Lois believes that Superman flies’, one might mean that Lois believes <Superman, the property of being a thing that flies> under a mode of presentation which identifies Superman as a superhero. I call this theory the *hidden-indexical* theory because the reference to the contextually determined type of mode of presentation is not carried by any expression in (1), and I call it the *hidden-indexical* theory because the implicit reference to a type of mode of presentation is context dependent, potentially varying from one context of utterance to another.

While the hidden-indexical theory may be the best way for the proponent of Russellian propositions to go, it has problems. Here are four of them.

First, the theory has the same problem of empty names that confronts the Russellian face-value theory (which is why I said the theory respects only certain Fregean intuitions). Intuitively,

¹³ I first proposed a version of this theory in Schiffer (1977). A slightly different version was independently presented in Crimmins and Perry (1989) and more fully elaborated in Crimmins (1992). I am critical of the theory in Schiffer (1992) and, most recently and most completely, in Schiffer (2003: 39-42). My present presentation of the theory is an abbreviated version of what I say in Schiffer (2003).

(5) Ralph believes that Tony Curtis is alive, but in fact there never was such an actor—the corrupt studio that produced the films that were supposed to star an actor named ‘Tony Curtis’ had a pool of look-alike actors whom they used interchangeably

may be true, but it cannot be true if the hidden-indexical theory is correct, since (given that names are referring expressions) if Tony Curtis did not exist, then the that-clause in (5) would fail to refer to any proposition, and thus (5) would express no complete proposition.

Second, the theory is committed to an implausible error theory: it must hold that ordinary speakers are in error about what they are stating when they make belief reports. The sentence ‘It’s raining’ does have a hidden-indexical semantics, and, as one would expect, a speaker uttering ‘It’s raining’ knows that she is stating that it is raining at such-and-such place, where the place is determined by her referential intentions. No one who utters ‘It’s raining’ would suppose that he simply means that it is raining. Yet one uttering, say, ‘I believe that $1^2 + 1^2 = 4$ ’ is in no way aware of stating *that for some m , he believes that $1^2 + 1^2 = 4$ under m and m is of type Ψ^** . Yet that is what the speaker would mean if the hidden-indexical theory were correct. One would think that if in uttering a sentence a speaker were implicitly referring to a thing and saying something about it, she would be aware of that.

Third, the theory makes it difficult to account for the validity of inferences such as

Harold believes everything that Fiona says.

Fiona says that there is life on Venus.

So, Harold believes that there is life on Venus.

Should we read the first premise as saying (11) or (12)?

(11) For any p and any m , if Fiona says p under m , then Harold believes p under m .

(12) For any p , if Fiona says p under some m , then Harold believes p under some m' .

I shall leave it to the reader to see that either reading makes for big problems in accounting for the validity of the displayed inference.¹⁴

Finally, the theory has a problem in accounting for the logical form of sentences of form

(1) *A* believes that *S*.

Should the hidden-indexical theory agree with the face-value theory that ‘believes’ in (1) expresses a *two*-place relation that holds between a believer and a proposition, or should it disagree with the face-value theory and maintain that ‘believes’ in (1) expresses a *three*-place relation that holds among a believer, a proposition, and a mode of presentation under which the believer believes the proposition? Either way there is a problem. If it is claimed that ‘believes’ expresses the three-place relation, then ‘ μ ’, construed as a name of a mode of presentation in

(13) Ralph believes that Fido is a dog under μ ,

would occur as an argument of the three-place belief relation. But it does not; it occurs as part of the adverbial phrase ‘under μ ’, and thereby behaves semantically exactly like ‘under the mistletoe’ in

(14) Carmelina kissed Ralph under the mistletoe,

and no one supposes that kissing is a three-place relation holding among kissers, kissees, and things under which kissers kiss kissees.¹⁵ If, on the other hand, the hidden-indexical theory claims that ‘believes’ is, as it appears to be, a genuinely two-place relational predicate, and that therefore ‘ μ ’ merely occurs as part of the adverbial phrase ‘under μ ’, then it becomes very difficult to explain why a literal utterance of

(15) Ralph believes that Fido is a dog

¹⁴ See Schiffer (2003: 41-2) and Salmon (1995).

¹⁵ See the test for whether a phrase is adverbial in Schiffer (1992: 518-9). What if the hidden-indexical theorist concedes the adverbial status of ‘under μ ’ in (13) but claims that ‘believes’ in ‘*A* believes that *S*’ expresses a three-place relation $B^3(x, p, m)$ which is instantiated just in case *x* believes *p* under *m*? (raised this response in conversation.) Then the hidden-indexical theorist could claim that the proposition expressed in uttering (15) (see below in the text) is not (16), but is rather the conceptually equivalent proposition that $\exists m[B^*(\text{Ralph}, \langle \text{Fido, doghood} \rangle, m) \ \& \ m \text{ is of type } \Psi^*]$. The problem with this response is that it is hard to see how it avoids inconsistency. If ‘believes’ in ‘*A* believes *p*’ is a three-place relational predicate, then so must it also be in ‘*A* believes *p* under *m*’. But the mooted response is motivated by the concession that ‘believes’ in the latter sentence form is a two-place relational predicate. It would seem, then, that the ‘believes’ in ‘*A* believes *p*’ is three-place only if it is also three-place in ‘*A* believes *p* under *m*’, and that returns us to the objection in the text.

must mean that

- (16) For some m , Ralph believes <Fido, doghood> under m and m is of type Ψ^*

where Ψ^* is some contextually determined type of mode of presentation. If ‘believes’ in (15) merely expresses the two-place belief relation, then the compositional determination of (15)’s meaning should allow one simply to state, without further adverbial embellishment about modes of presentation, that Ralph believes the proposition that Fido is a dog.

Fregean propositions and the face-value theory. Frege’s response to the objections he produced to the Russellian face-value theory led him to the view that the propositions we believe and assert are structured propositions whose basic components are not the objects and properties our beliefs and assertions may be about but are rather what he called *modes of presentation* of those objects and properties. For Frege, the proposition that Tony Curtis is an actor may be represented as the order pair $\langle m_{tc}, m_A \rangle$, where m_{tc} is a mode of presentation of Tony Curtis and m_A is a mode of presentation of the property of being an actor, and where $\langle m_{tc}, m_A \rangle$ is true in an arbitrary possible world w just in case in w there is a thing x and property Φ such that m_{tc} is a mode of presentation of x , m_A is a mode of presentation of Φ , and x instantiates Φ .¹⁶ This allows Frege to say that the name ‘Bernie Schwartz’ is associated with a different mode of presentation m_{bc} of Tony Curtis, so that the proposition that Bernie Schwartz is an actor may be represented as the distinct proposition $\langle m_{bc}, m_A \rangle$. In this way—and this was for Frege the main *raison d’être* of Fregean propositions—nothing prevents

¹⁶ More exactly, for any possible world w , a Fregean proposition $\langle m, m' \rangle$ is true in w iff in w : there is a thing x and property Φ such that m is a mop of x & m' is a mop of Φ & x instantiates Φ ; false in w iff in w : there is a thing x and property Φ such that m is a mop of x & m' is a mop of Φ & x does not instantiate Φ ; and neither true nor false in w iff in w : it is not the case that there is a thing x and property Φ such that m is a mop of x & m' is a mop of Φ .

On this account, an utterance of a name will “rigidly designate” its referent just in case the mode of presentation expressed by the utterance of the name is a mode of presentation of the same thing in every possible world in which it is a mode of presentation of anything.

(6) I believe that Tony Curtis is alive, but I don't believe that Bernie Schwarz is alive

from being true. So that is how Frege avoids the problem that reports like (6) raise for the Russellian face-value theorist. And he can avoid the problem of empty names presented by the fact that a belief report may be true even though its that-clause contains a name which has no bearer by claiming that the mode of presentation to which the occurrence of the name refers need not be a mode of presentation of anything, i.e. that there need not be anything of which that mode of presentation is a mode of presentation.

There are problems with the Fregean face-value theory—the theory which claims both that the face-value theory is correct and that the propositions we believe are Fregean propositions. One problem is that the Fregean theory is incomplete absent an account of what modes of presentation are supposed to be.¹⁷ Although Frege was appealing to our pre-theoretic notion of a thing's appearing to us, or of our thinking of a thing, in a certain way, that pre-theoretic notion is not able to do all that Frege needs it to do. Frege needs modes of presentation for every kind of thing we might think about—numbers, properties, abstract entities like nations and languages, etc.—and he needs things that can account for how a person may believe that Tony Curtis is an actor while disbelieving that Bernie Schwartz is an actor, notwithstanding that Tony Curtis is Bernie Schwartz; he needs things that can be available as referents of singular terms in that-clauses even when they present nothing (as they must if Fregeans are to avoid a problem of empty names); and he needs things that will not preclude names from being rigid designators of their bearers. There is disagreement among Fregeans about what modes of presentation are, and there is not to date an unproblematic account of what exactly Fregean propositions are supposed to be.

A second problem is that the Fregean face-value theory is very implausible, even if Fregean propositions are the objects of belief. For consider this belief report:

(17) Most British citizens believe that Osama Bin Laden is alive and hiding in the mountains of Afghanistan.

¹⁷ The same is of course true of attempts, such as those considered above, to incorporate “modes of presentation” into Russellian theories.

We have no trouble understanding (17), and we have no trouble in supposing it might be true; but it is very unlikely that it is true if the that-clause in (17) refers to a Fregean proposition, for whatever modes of presentation are taken to be, it is extremely unlikely that there are modes of presentation of Bin Laden, Afghanistan, the hiding relation, being alive, etc. such that most British citizens think of those things under precisely those modes of presentation. Yet if the Fregean face-value theory were true, then there would have to be such modes of presentation in order for (17) to be true. In fact, it should be obvious on reflection that, contrary to what the Fregean face-value theory entails, we can understand true belief reports without having to know exactly how the believer thinks of the objects and properties her belief is about.

The foregoing objection to the Fregean face-value theory is evidently decisive, but a proponent of Fregean propositions might hang onto them by rejecting that part of the face-value theory which claims that that-clauses in belief reports always refer to that-clauses. The idea would be that the meaning of a belief report permits but does not require that-clauses to refer to Fregean propositions. In uttering

(18) Ralph believes that Fido is a dog

it *may* be that there are modes of presentation m_F and m_D of Fido and doghood, respectively, such that the speaker is referring to the Fregean proposition $\langle m_F, m_D \rangle$ by her utterance of ‘that Fido is a dog’, but, the idea continues, it is more likely that what would be asserted in an utterance of (18) would either be that

(19) There are modes of presentation m and m' such that m is a mode of presentation of Fido, m' is a mode of presentation of doghood, and Ralph believes $\langle m, m' \rangle$,

or, more plausibly, that

(20) There are modes of presentation m and m' such that m is a mode of presentation of type Ψ of Fido, m' is a mode of presentation of type Ψ' of doghood, and Ralph believes $\langle m, m' \rangle$,

where Ψ and Ψ' are contextually determined types of modes of presentation.¹⁸

¹⁸ (20) is more promising for the Fregean than (19), because if what is asserted by an utterance of (1) is a proposition in the style of (19), then the Fregean cannot account for the truth of, say, ‘Lois believes that Superman flies but does not believe that Clark Kent flies’. See Forbes (1990).

The attempt to hang onto Fregean propositions by revising the face-value theory is unpromising. Among its problems are these two. First, none of the inferences used to motivate the face-value theory (pp. 000-000 above) is valid when, as in (19) and (20), the that-clauses are quantified into and thus not occurring as singular terms (I leave the demonstration of this to the reader). Second, if the Fregean proposal at issue were correct, it should apply to

(21) Ralph said that Fido is a dog,

as well as to

(18) Ralph believes that Fido is a dog;

but it is very implausible that what is asserted in an utterance of (21) can be that

(22) There are modes of presentation m and m' such that m is a mode of presentation of Fido, m' is a mode of presentation of doghood, and Ralph said $\langle m, m' \rangle$.

This is implausible because it is extremely unlikely that Ralph, in his utterance of ‘Fido is a dog’, will have said any such Fregean proposition. If he did mean some such proposition, then there would be a specification of what he said that is other than ‘that Fido is a dog’ and that refers to a Fregean proposition. But it is clear that there need be no such alternative specification of what he said.¹⁹

Propositions as sets of possible worlds and the face-value theory. Russellian and Fregean propositions are *structured* entities whose basic components are not themselves propositions, Russellians and Fregeans differing on what they take those basic components to be. There are also conceptions of propositions according to which the propositions we believe are unstructured. According to one such view, whose chief proponent is Robert Stalnaker,²⁰ propositions are sets of possible worlds. For example, on this view the proposition that snow is white is the set of possible worlds in which snow is white. The view allows for subtleties about how contextual factors may operate in communication to delimit the possible worlds to be considered in individuating a particular proposition. But the view has problems, the main one being that it is forced to

¹⁹ This objection and its wording are borrowed from Schiffer (1992: 506, fn. 10).

²⁰ Stalnaker (1984).

say that there is just one necessarily true proposition, since any necessarily true proposition, being true in every possible world, must be identified with the set of all possible worlds. This is a problem because a person may believe the necessarily true proposition that dogs are dogs without also believing the necessarily true proposition that any planar map can be colored using at most four colors in such a way that no two adjacent areas are of the same color. Stalnaker has been resourceful in his efforts to ameliorate this highly counter-intuitive result,²¹ but one may question whether he has been resourceful enough.

Pleonastic propositions and the face-value theory. This is the theory I advance in *The Things We Mean*, so I shall be very brief. *Pleonastic entities* are entities whose existence is entailed by what I call *something-from-nothing transformations*. These are conceptually valid inferences that take one from a statement in which no reference is made to a thing of a certain kind to a statement in which there is a reference to a thing of that kind. The property of being a dog, for example, is a pleonastic entity. From the statement

Lassie is a dog,

whose only singular term is ‘Lassie’, we can validly infer its pleonastic equivalent

Lassie has the property of being a dog,

which contains the new singular term ‘the property of being a dog’, whose referent is the property of being a dog. I call the entities these transformations introduce *pleonastic entities* because something-from-nothing transformations often take one from a statement to a pleonastic equivalent of it. Propositions, the things to which that-clauses refer, are also pleonastic entities. They have their something-from-nothing transformations, such as the one that takes us from

Lassie is a dog,

whose only singular term continues to be Lassie, to another of its pleonastic equivalents,

That Lassie is a dog is true

(more colloquially, ‘It is true that Lassie is a dog’), which contains the singular term ‘that Lassie is a dog’, whose referent is the proposition that Lassie is a dog. Owing to the

²¹ Stalnaker (1987).

pleonastic nature of the propositions we believe and assert, the relation between a that-clause in a propositional-attitude report and the pleonastic proposition to which it refers is importantly different from the usual relation between singular terms and their referents: the contextual factors which determine the reference of a that-clause also individuate it in a way that allows the pleonastic proposition to which the that-clause refers to be both fine-grained and unstructured. Pleonastic propositions are individuated in part by what it takes to believe them, so that, say, the propositions to which the that-clauses in utterances of ‘Ralph believes that Tony Curtis is alive’ and ‘Ralph does not believe that Bernie Schwartz is alive’ may refer to propositions with the same possible-worlds truth conditions (both propositions will be true in an arbitrary possible world just in case Tony Curtis, i.e. Bernie Schwartz, is alive in that world) but differ because, e.g., in order to believe the proposition to which the utterance of ‘that Tony Curtis is alive’ refers, one must think of Tony Curtis as a movie actor. It is not for me to assess whether the face-value theory of belief reports is viable when combined with the further claim that the referents of that-clauses are pleonastic propositions.

III. Objections to the Face-Value Theory

While several alternatives to the face-value theory have been proposed (see section IV), there are surprisingly few published objections to it *per se* (although there are plenty of objections to packages of the face-value theory and this, that, or the other conception of propositions). At any rate, I am aware of only two objections to the theory that do not presuppose its being conjoined with some particular conception of propositions.

Any objection to either the existence of propositions or to their deployment in the theory of linguistic and mental representation is *eo ipso* an objection to the face-value theory, at least on the assumption that there are true reports.²² Donald Davidson objected to the deployment:

²² A theorist might allow that the face-value theory gives the correct semantics of belief reports while denying that there are any propositions for that-clauses to refer to. This theorist will therefore deny that there are any true that-clause-containing propositional-attitude reports, but she might try to sugar-coat this highly counter-intuitive consequence with a so-called fictionalist account of propositional-attitude reports, according to which a belief report may be true in the “belief story” even though no such report is literally true. See e.g. Crimmins (1998). These efforts are inspired by ‘s ((1980) and (1989)) fictionalist account of numbers, according to which numerical sentences like ‘ $1 + 1 = 2$ ’ cannot be true, because numerals purport to be names of numbers and numbers do not exist, yet such sentences may be “true in the fiction of

Paradoxically, the one thing meanings [= abstract entities such as propositions] do not seem to do is oil the wheels of a theory of meaning—at least as long as we require of such a theory that it non-trivially give the meaning of every sentence in the language. My objection to meanings is not that they are abstract or that their identity conditions are obscure, but that they have no demonstrated use.²³

But Davidson was assuming that there could be no compositional theory of propositions, and it has become well known since Davidson's article was originally published in 1967 that there are various ways of getting such propositions. Whether or not a proposition-deploying theory of meaning needs compositionally constructed propositions is, however, another question.²⁴

Other prominent philosophers object to the existence of propositions. Some of these philosophers—such as Nelson Goodman, Paul Benacerraf, and Hartry Field²⁵—object to all abstract objects, but they have no quarrel with propositions other than that they are abstract objects. Goodman seems simply to find abstract objects too mysterious to play any serious explanatory role, and, like many others, he can see no reason to believe in anything that cannot play an explanatory role. Benacerraf and Field worry about the possibility of knowledge and reliable beliefs about abstract objects, which ought to be possible if abstract objects exist. Willard Quine has no problem with abstract objects *per se*, provided they enjoy reasonably clear criteria of individuation—that is, criteria for determining when abstract objects x and y are the same or different.²⁶ So Quine tolerates sets, since $\text{set } x = \text{set } y$ iff x and y have the same members. But propositions, he argues, have no clear criteria of individuation, and this because in order to have a criterion for saying whether two sentences express the same or different propositions there would have to be a viable analytic/synthetic distinction, and, Quine argues, there can be no such distinction.

arithmetic.” It will be a working hypothesis of this paper that there are at least some true propositional-attitude reports. After all, what is the point of trying to advance a fictionalist account of propositional-attitude reports if it is impossible for one to state anything?

²³ Davidson (1984a: 20-21).

²⁴ See Schiffer (2003: Chapters 3 and 4).

²⁵ Goodman (1978); Benacerraf (1973); Field (1989).

None of these objections to propositions is compelling. Goodman's "objection" is really just an expression of a distaste for abstract entities, and offers no *reason* for disbelieving in propositions or any other abstract entities. Benacerraf's objection presupposes an untenable causal theory of knowledge,²⁷ and Field's claim that there can be no accounting for reliable beliefs about abstract entities fails to take into account the best ways of accounting for such reliability.²⁸ Quine's argument from criteria of individuation is problematic in a few ways, but the principal way is its assumption that *F*s exist only if there are criteria for individuating *F*s, i.e. criteria that enable us to know whether *F*s *x* and *y* are the same or different. If this really were a requirement on the existence of *F*s, we should have to conclude that there are no restaurants: Le Poisson Rance, owned by Jean-Paul Gras, is located at 33 Waverly Place. Gras closes that restaurant, opens a restaurant with the same chef and menu at 14 Bleecker Street, and calls it Chez Gras. Is Chez Gras the same restaurant as Le Poisson Rance? We lack criteria of individuation for restaurants that enable us to give a determinate answer.²⁹ Propositions are merely in the same boat as restaurants.

There is an interesting objection to the face-value theory that has nothing to do with any problems about the existence of propositions.³⁰ According to the face-value theory, the *that*-clause in

(23) Jane believes that Slovenia will win the World Cup

refers to the proposition that Slovenia will win the World Cup, and this consequence seems confirmed by the fact that

(24) Jane believes the proposition that Slovenia will win the World Cup

is pleonastically equivalent to (23). After all, if the face value theory is correct, then instances of 'that *S*' and 'the proposition that *S*' refer to the same proposition, so, it would seem, they ought to be intersubstitutable *salva veritate*. Now, if the face-value theory of belief reports is correct, then we should expect no less of the face-value theory of other propositional-attitude reports, such as, say, those of the form

²⁶ See e.g. Quine (1970).

²⁷ See Field (1989).

²⁸ See e.g. Hale and Wright (1992), and Schiffer (2003: Chapter 2).

²⁹ I believe I got the restaurant example from Richard Grandy.

³⁰ So far as I am aware, the problem was first raised in Prior (1971: Chapter 2). See also Bach (1997), King (2002), Moltmann (2003), and Schiffer (2003: 92-5).

(25) *A* hopes that *S*.

And if the face-value theory of (25) is true, then, reflecting back on (23) and (24), it would seem that we should expect (25) to be pleonastically equivalent to

(26) *A* hopes the proposition that *S*.

The trouble is, they clearly are not equivalent. Not only is

(27) Jane hopes that Slovenia will win the World Cup

not equivalent to

(28) Jane hopes the proposition that Slovenia will win the World Cup;

(28) is not even grammatical!³¹ In short, if the face-value theory of (27) is correct, then its that-clause refers to the proposition that Slovenia will win the World Cup. But if it does, then should we not be able replace *salva veritate* its that-clause with the co-referential singular term ‘the proposition that Slovenian will win the World Cup’? Yet that, as the ungrammatical (28) reveals, is precisely what we cannot do.

It is not an option to maintain the face-value theory of belief reports while denying the face-value theory of hope reports. One reason (there are others) is that it is difficult to see how we can explain why a necessary condition for one’s hoping that *S* is that one not believe that *S* if that-clauses in belief reports, but not in hope reports, referred to propositions. It would seem that if one is to hold the face-value theory of belief reports, then one will have to hold the face-value theory of hope reports and therefore maintain that the that-clauses in hope reports refer to propositions, even though ‘the proposition that *S*’ cannot be substituted for them. But can it plausibly be maintained that that-clauses in hope reports refer to propositions despite this failure of substitutivity? A definite answer may not now be possible, but at least three things should incline us to answer yes.³² First, we cannot conclude that because the only semantic role of a singular term *t* in an utterance is to refer to *x*, that we can replace *t* *salva veritate* with any other singular term that also refers to *x*. As Paul Horwich pointed out to me (in conversation), instances of apposition provide clear examples where such substitutivity fails. For

³¹ ‘Predicts’, ‘guesses’, and other propositional-attitude verbs also produce ungrammaticality in the same way. In some cases—e.g. ‘Jane fears/expects that Slovenia will win the World Cup’—grammaticality is preserved, but the meaning is drastically changed.

³² Further considerations are offered in Schiffer (2003: 95).

example, even if Pavarotti is the greatest tenor, we still cannot substitute ‘the greatest tenor’ *salva veritate* for Pavarotti in

(29) The Italian singer Pavarotti never sings Wagner
since

(30) The Italian singer the greatest tenor never sings Wagner

is not well formed. Second, if the substitutivity facts in play showed that that-clauses in hope reports do not refer to propositions, then they also show that they do not refer to anything. For example,

(31) Jane hopes the sentence that Slovenian will win the World Cup

is as ungrammatical as (28). But it is unclear how one can account for the logical form of hope reports if their that-clauses cannot function as singular terms. Third, the case for taking that-clauses in belief reports to be singular terms is pretty compelling, as is the claim that whatever is going on with that-clauses in belief reports must also be going on with them in other propositional-attitude reports.

Still, one cannot be confident that any face-value theory is correct absent a plausible account of why substitutivity fails when it does. If the that-clause in (27) refers to the proposition that Slovenian will win the World Cup, then why does not ‘the proposition that Slovenian will win the World Cup’ in (28) also refer to that proposition? We cannot be confident of what is going on with that-clauses until we can account for the asymmetry between belief and hope reports, and I am not aware of any plausible account of it.

IV. Non-Propositionalist Alternatives to the Face-Value Theory

In section I, we saw how proponents of Russellian and Fregean propositions might be motivated to seek alternatives to the face-value theory of belief reports. In this section I consider proposed alternatives that do not entail that believing is a relation to propositions or involve any other commitment to propositions. These alternatives fall into two classes: those which entail that believing is not a relation to things of any kind, and thus that that-clauses never function as singular terms (*non-relational accounts of believing*), and those which entail that believing is a relation to things other than

propositions and that that-clauses may, and typically do, occur as referring to things of that kind (*non-propositional relational accounts of believing*).

Non-relational accounts of believing

One already-noticed reason for supposing that ‘believes’ in belief reports expresses a relation between believers and the things they believe is the validity of inferences like

Harold believes that there is life on Venus, and so does

Fiona.

So, there is something that they both believe—to wit, that

there is life on Venus.

For how are we to read the quantification in the conclusion other than as saying that there *is* some *thing* that Harold and Fiona both believe? Well, it might be replied, in the same way we are to read the quantification in ‘There are many things that don’t exist—the Loch Ness Monster, God, Sherlock Holmes’.³³ The question is whether the quantification in the conclusion of the displayed inference (‘there is something that they both believe’) is, to use some jargon, *objectual* or *non-objectual*. A quantification of the form ‘There is something that is *F*’ is objectual if it entails that there *exists* some thing that is *F*, non-objectual if it does not have that entailment. One form of non-objectual quantification is so-called *substitutional quantification* wherein, for example, ‘John is something’ is true just in case some substitution instance of ‘John is *X*’—such as ‘John is smart’—is true. But non-objectual quantification need not be substitutional; like objectual quantification, it might be a primitive form of quantification. Those who deny that believing is a relation will hold that that-clauses are not referring expressions and that quantifications like ‘Ralph believes something’ are non-objectual.

A compositional truth theory for a language *L* is a finitely storable theory of *L* which ascribes semantic properties to the finitely many words and expression-forming operations of *L* in such a way as to determine, for each of the infinitely many sentences of *L* that can be used to say something true or false, the condition, or conditions, under which an utterance of that sentence would be true. For many theorists, one big selling point for the relational account of believing, wherein the quantifications in question are

³³ Lycan (1979).

objectual, is that it makes it easy to see how to accommodate belief reports in a compositional truth theory—that is to say, makes it easy to see how the truth-value of a belief report is determined by the semantic values the words composing the report have in that report. But what are we to make of the complex predicate ‘believes that Slovenia will win the World Cup’ in

(23) Jane believes that Slovenia will win the World Cup

if ‘believes’ is not occurring in that report as a relational predicate? No one should object to taking the predicate’s extension to be the set of things that believe that Slovenia will win the World Cup, which allows us to say that (23) is true just in case the extension of ‘Jane’—viz. Jane—belongs to the extension of ‘believes that Slovenia will win the World Cup’, which in turn entails that (23) is true iff Jane believes that Slovenia will win the World Cup. The problem is to see how the extension of that complex predicate is determined by the extensions of its component words if ‘believes’ does not occur in it as a transitive verb, and there must be such a determination if the language to which the report belongs enjoys a correct compositional truth theory.

There are two ways to respond to this “problem.” One is to deny that belief reports can be accommodated in a compositional truth theory and to argue that natural languages neither have nor need compositional truth theories. This is the approach I took in *Remnants of Meaning*.³⁴ The other response, proposed most notably by Arthur Prior and Jaakko Hintikka, is to treat ‘believes that’ as a certain sort of operator. Neither response is promising.

Some will think that the approach which denies compositional semantics is problematic precisely because it denies compositional semantics, but there is another problem even if the denial of compositional semantics is unproblematic.³⁵ This problem is that no determinate sense can be made of the non-compositionalist’s claim that that-clauses do not refer to propositions once this theorist has said all that she needs to say. The theorist in question does not deny that many belief reports are true, she does not deny that inferences like the one most recently displayed are valid, and she does not deny that any of the following may be true:

³⁴ See also Hofweber (2000).

³⁵ See Schiffer (2003: Chapter 4).

That there is life on Venus is Harold's theory.

That there is life on Venus is true iff there is life on Venus.

That there is life on Venus has its truth condition both essentially and absolutely.

That there is life on Venus is implausible.

That there is life on Venus is one of many things that are implausible.

That there is life on Venus is abstract—i.e. has no physical attributes—and mind- and language-independent.

What then is the cash-value of the debate between this theorist and one who maintains that that-clauses refer to propositions? Well, it may be said that the first denies, while the second affirms, that propositions exist. But what can the cash-value of *that* debate come to, given all the that the two theorists hold in common? What would count as a determinate resolution of this debate? The only concept of existence on which I feel I have any grip makes it difficult to deny that propositions exist, given the truth of all the that-clause-containing utterances the non-compositionalist is willing to acknowledge. But if it is acknowledged that propositions exist, then the view that that-clauses do not refer to them is not well motivated.

The operator account of 'believes that' promises to be a non-relationist account of believing which comports with compositional semantics. Trivially, 'believes that' is syntactically an "operator" in that it takes a sentence and makes a sentence. What those who propose an operator account of 'believes that' have in mind, however, is a way of giving a semantic rule governing the expression 'believes that' which yields a truth condition for every belief report. What rules of this sort are on offer? While Arthur Prior clearly advocated an operator account of 'believes that'—in part for the problems raised by examples like hope reports—he never actually proposed a semantics for the operator. Hintikka does provide an operator account that is modeled on the operator account of 'necessarily' in modal logic, but it is merely a notational variant of the view, discussed above, that believing is a relation to propositions construed as sets of possible worlds.

At this point in the development of our subject, there seems not to be any plausible non-relational account of believing.

Non-propositional relational accounts of believing

Most philosophers who deny that believing is a relation to propositions hold that it is a relation to things other than propositions. Since the things we believe have truth-values and other semantic properties, these alternative objects of belief must be linguistic, or quasi-linguistic, entities of some kind—sentences, utterances, mental representations, or whatever.

If believing is a relation to linguistic entities of some stripe or other, what stripe exactly is it? They cannot be public language sentence *types*, since too many sentence types (e.g. ‘She isn’t there yet’) cannot have truth-values, while the things we believe must have, or at least be capable of having, truth-values. For this reason, Donald Davidson proposed his famous paratactic theory of propositional-attitude reports, which entails that believing is a relation to utterance tokens.³⁶ Davidson’s idea runs as follows.

Although Pierre is a monolingual speaker of French, I may speak truly in saying

(32) Pierre believes that snow is white.

According to Davidson, my utterance (32) really consists of two distinct utterances linked by parataxis, to be represented as

(33) Pierre believes that. Snow is white.

The claim is that my utterance of ‘that’ in (32) occurs as a demonstrative which refers to my utterance of ‘snow is white’ which immediately follows it. When I utter ‘snow is white’ in uttering (32), I am not asserting that snow is white. Rather, I utter it to produce an utterance with a certain content for the sole purpose of ascribing to Pierre a belief with the same content: my utterance of (32) is true, according to Davidson’s paratactic theory, just in case Pierre has a belief with the same content as that of my utterance of ‘snow is white’ to which my utterance of the demonstrative ‘that’ refers.

The implausibility of Davidson’s theory may be greater than its considerable ingenuity. There are several problems.

- a. From a typical utterance of (32) we should expect to be able to infer
- (34) There is something such that Pierre believes that it is white,

³⁶ Davidson (1984a) and (1984b).

but

(35) There is something such that Pierre believes that. It is white.

is meaningless.

b. None of the inferences (pp. 000-000) used to motivate the face-value theory are valid if Davidson's paratactic theory is correct.³⁷ I shall leave the demonstration of this to the reader.

c. The paratactic theory owes an account of utterance content which does not appeal to propositions. Davidson thought he had such a theory. He thought that a compositional truth theory for a language in the style of Tarski could serve as a meaning theory for the language, where a theory of meaning for a language *L* is, for Davidson, a finitely axiomatized theory knowledge of which would enable one to understand utterances in *L*.³⁸ But Davidson's proposal that a truth theory can serve as a meaning theory is highly problematic,³⁹ and any theory that presupposes it inherits its problems.

d. Even if Davidson's meaning theory were correct, it is not clear how it would help to explain the idea of a belief state's having the same content as an utterance token, since, on the face of it, Davidson's truth-theoretic account of meaning has no application to belief states. So even if Davidson has given a correct account of natural language meaning, he still owes an account of belief content which enables us to understand talk of a belief state's having the "same content" as an utterance token.

e. If Davidson's theory of (32) were correct, one would expect it also to be true of (32)'s French translation,

(36) Pierre croit que la neige est blanche.

But 'que' has no use in French as a demonstrative. Are we to suppose that while a paratactic treatment of (32) is correct, a paratactic treatment of (36) is not correct?⁴⁰

f. An apparently pretty big problem with the claim that believing is a relation to utterance tokens is that there are more beliefs than there are utterance tokens. A person might have a belief which neither she nor anyone else has ever expressed, and which no

³⁷ See Burge (1986).

³⁸ Tarski (1956); Davidson (1984c).

³⁹ See Schiffer (1987: Chapter 5) and Schiffer (2003: §8.2).

⁴⁰ It would seem that Davidson later abandoned his paratactic account of belief reports. In (2001a: 57-8) he wrote: "There is ... no plausible alternative to taking [the that-clause in a belief report] as a singular term which, by referring to an appropriate entity, specifies the relevant belief."

one has ever attributed to anyone. Here it will be true that the person believes something, yet there is evidently no utterance token available to be what she believes.

g. One cannot know the *assertion made*, the truth stated, by (32) without knowing *what* Pierre believes, the *content* of his belief, where this includes, for example, knowing that he has a belief that is true if, and only if, snow is white. Davidson's account is in conflict with this datum. On his account, one can know the assertion made in the utterance of (32) without knowing the first thing about what Pierre believes, the content of his belief. According to Davidson, the only assertion made in (32) is made by the utterance of 'Pierre believes that', where 'that' occurs as a demonstrative which refers to a distinct utterance of 'snow is white'. The assertion made in the utterance of (32) is merely one that is true iff Pierre is in a belief state which has the same content as the referred to utterance of 'snow is white'. But that is something that could be known by a monolingual speaker of Pashto: she could know that Pierre was in a belief state whose content matched that of my utterance of 'snow is white' even though she had no idea of the content of that utterance. It should be clear that a version of this problem will infect any account which holds that a belief report is true just in case its subject is in a belief state with the same content as a certain expression or utterance to which reference is made in the report.

So much, then, for linguistic accounts of belief reports. A quasi-linguistic account has, however, been proposed which may seem to avoid the foregoing problems. Like Davidson's account, it crucially relies for its motivation on Davidson's idea that a truth theory can serve as a meaning theory. The theory is the same as the face-value theory of

(1) *A* believes that *S*

except that according to it that-clauses refer not to propositions but to what proponents of the theory call *interpreted logical forms* (ILFs).⁴¹ Here a logical form, or LF, is a technical notion used in Chomskian linguistics to describe that level of the syntactic analysis of a sentence which is the proper object of semantic interpretation. An *interpreted* LF is a representation of the LF in which semantic values are paired with expressions in the LF, where those semantic values are of the kind that would enter into

⁴¹ Larson and Ludlow (1993) and Larson and Segal (1995). A similar proposal is made in Richard (1990).

an extensional Tarskian truth theory for the language of the kind Davidson advocates. Simplifying, we might represent the ILF to which the that-clause in ‘Ralph believes that Fido is a dog’ refers as the set-theoretic entity

(37) $\langle\langle\text{‘Fido’}, \text{Fido}\rangle, \langle\text{‘is a dog’}, \text{the set of dogs}\rangle\rangle$,

this ILF being true iff Fido belongs to the set of dogs, which is to say, iff Fido is a dog.

Even this simplified toy model of an ILF must be considerably complicated just to get a simplified toy model for sentences with quantifiers, where those quantifiers may be treated syncategorematically, and thus not assigned semantic values,⁴² or with pronouns and demonstratives, for which only tokens of those expressions may have semantic values. But (37) already gives us enough to object to the theory.

For one thing, ILF theory can be no more promising than its presupposition that a truth theory serve as a meaning theory, and, as noted, it is arguable that that presupposition is problematic. A more immediate problem is close to the epistemological problem, (g), encountered by Davidson’s paratactic theory. Suppose that the set of dogs = the set of things most loved by fleas. Then the ILF (37) = the ILF

(38) $\langle\langle\text{‘Fido’}, \text{Fido}\rangle, \langle\text{‘is a dog’}, \text{the set of things most loved by fleas}\rangle\rangle$,

and it is clear that someone—say, a monolingual speaker of Japanese—could know that Ralph stands to (38) in the relation the ILF theorist takes to be the semantic value of ‘believes’ and not know that Ralph believes that Fido is a dog. It might seem that the ILF theorist can avoid this problem by taking properties, rather than sets, to be the appropriate semantic values of predicates, so that the ILF to which ‘that Fido is a dog’ refers is not (37) but rather

(38) $\langle\langle\text{‘Fido’}, \text{Fido}\rangle, \langle\text{‘is a dog’}, \text{doghood}\rangle\rangle$.

The trouble now is that this theory would be for all intents and purposes a propositionalist proposal whereby the propositions to which that-clauses refer are truth-conditionally equivalent to the Russellian propositions they determine—as (38) determines the Russellian proposition $\langle\text{Fido}, \text{doghood}\rangle$ —and the linguistic components of ILFs play the role of Fregean modes of presentation.

⁴² An expression is syncategematic in the context of ILF theory if the truth theory for the language assigns it no semantic value but rather interprets it by a clause in the truth theory, in the way that, say, quantifiers and connectives are interpreted in standard truth definitions in predicate logic.

V. Summary and Conclusion

The topic of this paper is propositional content, the kind of content our thoughts and speech acts possess, which I provisionally identified as whatever that-clauses ascribe in propositional-attitude and speech-act reports. *Propositions*, of some stripe or other, are propositional contents, if the relevant generalization of the face-value theory of belief reports is correct, and that theory has a defeasible default status: it is the theory that must be defeated if it is not to be accepted, the only theory of the semantics of belief reports that enjoys direct intuitive support (alternatives to the face-value theory are motivated by perceived problems with the face-value theory).

One problem with the face-value theory is that it awaits a complementary account of propositions, and there are problems with the best known contenders. Problems some of these contenders confront when slotted into the face-value theory invite revisions of the face-value theory, such as the hidden-indexical theory of belief reports or the version of Fregeanism whereby that-clauses, in the typical case, partially characterize but do not refer to Fregean propositions. Yet these revisions were found to suffer from problems of their own. Another problem we saw the face-value theory to encounter was the inability to preface the that clause in ‘*A* hopes that *S*’ with ‘the proposition’ and achieve thereby a sentence with the same truth-value (‘*A* hopes the proposition that *S*’ is not even grammatical), which is puzzling if ‘that *S*’ refers to the proposition that *S*. Well-known vagaries concerning substitutivity *salva veritate* prevent this from being on its own a decisive objection to the face-value theory, but in the absence of an account of why the substitutions fail in hope (and certain other) reports, one cannot be confident that the inability to substitute the ‘the proposition that *S*’ for ‘that *S*’ does not cover a decisive objection, and such an account is not yet known. If the substitutivity problem does cover a decisive objection, the objection would be decisive to any referential account of that-clauses: ‘*A* hopes the sentence/utterance/mental representation that *S*’ is no more meaningful than ‘*A* hopes the proposition that *S*’.

The substitutivity problem might suggest, as it suggested to Arthur Prior,⁴³ that believing is not a relation, and that, therefore, quantifications like ‘Ralph believes

⁴³ Prior (1981).

something' are not *objectual* quantifications. But both versions of this tack proved problematic.

The most popular alternative to the theory that identifies propositional contents with propositions, and thus takes propositional attitudes to be relations to propositions, is the view that propositional attitudes are relations to linguistic, or quasi-linguistic, entities of some kind or other. Yet these accounts seem even more problematic than the propositionalist views they hope to supplant.

On balance, my unprejudiced bet is on the theory I advanced in *The Things We Mean*, which holds that propositional contents are what I called pleonastic propositions. I suspect, however, that others might have a different opinion. I know that we have not reached the end of discussion on the problem of propositional content.

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