

A Problem for a Direct-Reference Theory of Belief Reports

STEPHEN SCHIFFER
New York University

The direct-reference theory of belief reports to which I allude is the one held by such theorists as Nathan Salmon, Scott Soames, and David Braun.¹ Quora theorists of direct-reference semantics, these philosophers hold that:

- (1) The propositions we believe and say are *Russellian* propositions: structured propositions whose basic components are the objects and properties our thoughts and speech acts are about.
- (2) Many singular terms—e.g. pronouns, simple demonstratives, and names—typically function as *directly-referential singular terms*, where a token of a singular term is directly referential provided its only contribution to the proposition expressed is its referent. It is customary for direct-reference theorists to represent the content of a token of 't is F' as the Russellian singular proposition $\langle x, \Phi \rangle$, where x is the referent of the token of the singular term t and Φ is the property expressed by the token of the predicate F . Necessarily, $\langle x, \Phi \rangle$ is true iff x instantiates Φ , false otherwise.

Their theory of belief reports is defined by their also holding that:

- (3) A belief report of the form ' A believes that S ' is true iff the referent of the substitution instance of ' A ' stands in the belief relation—the two-place relation expressed by 'believes' in ' A believes that S '—to the Russellian proposition to which the substitution instance of 'that S ' refers. For example, 'Lester believes that Fido is a dog' is true just in case Lester stands in the belief relation to $\langle \text{Fido, doghood} \rangle$.

I shall refer to this direct-reference theory of belief reports as the Theory.²

We may lead up to the problem to which my title alludes in the following way. Those who hold the Theory would admit that the following could easily be true of two brilliant logicians, Ralph and Jane:

Ralph rationally believes the contradiction that George Eliot was a man and George Eliot was not a man; but Jane is precluded from rationally believing that contradiction.

This is puzzling, and the Theorist must explain how it could be true. She may *seem* to have a reasonable response in three steps.

In step one, the Theorist accepts the following two-part Frege-inspired doctrine of *de re* belief, which I have elsewhere called *Frege's constraint*:³

- (A) x is believed by y to be such that . . . x . . . iff $\exists m$ (m is a mode of presentation of x & x is believed by y under m to be such that . . . x . . .).
- (B) For any modes of presentation m and m' of x , if x is rationally both believed by y under m to be such that . . . x . . . and either disbelieved or not believed by y under m' to be such that . . . x . . ., then y does not take m and m' to be modes of presentation of the same thing.⁴

Part (A) allows the theorist to say that x may be believed by y to be such that . . . x . . . under one mode of presentation m , disbelieved by y to be such that . . . x . . . under a second mode of presentation m' , and neither believed nor disbelieved by y to be such that . . . x . . . under a third mode of presentation m'' . Part (B) puts a constraint on when this can happen. The doctrine wisely leaves open what modes of presentation are, what it is for x to be believed by y under m to be such that . . . x . . ., and what it is to “take” two modes of presentation to be modes of presentation of the same thing.

In step two, the theorist accepts Nathan Salmon's observation that:

The [direct-reference] thesis (together with certain relatively uncontroversial assumptions) yields the consequence that *de re* belief (or *belief of*) is simply a special case of *de dicto* belief (*belief that*). To believe *of* an individual x , *de re*, that it (he, she) is F , is to believe *de dicto* the singular proposition about (containing) x that it (he, she) is F , a proposition that can be expressed using an ordinary proper name for x [or any other directly-referential singular term whose referent is x].⁵

I shall call this consequence of the Theory *the special-case consequence*. Stated succinctly, it says that:

Necessarily, if y believes that . . . x . . ., then x is believed by y to be such that . . . x . . .

To see that the special-case consequence is a consequence of the Theory, consider ‘Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man’. Since, according to the Theory, ‘George Eliot’ is there functioning as a directly-referential name of George Eliot, the open sentence obtained from the sentence, ‘Ralph believes that *x* was a man’, expresses a property such that ‘Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man’ is true just in case George Eliot has that property. One way of expressing this property is to say that it is the property a person has just in case he or she is believed by Ralph to be such that he or she was a man.

In the third and final step, the Theorist offers the following solution to the puzzle about Jane and Ralph. While the names ‘George Eliot’ and ‘Mary Ann Evans’ belong to the idiolects of both Jane and Ralph, only Jane knows that ‘George Eliot’ was the pen name of the author whose other name was ‘Mary Ann Evans’; Ralph mistakenly thinks the two names are names of different people. As a result of this (together with a couple of other innocuous things), there is the following crucial difference between Ralph and Jane. Ralph associates one mode of presentation of George Eliot with the name ‘George Eliot’ and another with the name ‘Mary Ann Evans’, and he takes these two modes of presentation to be of different people. George Eliot is believed by Ralph under the first mode of presentation to be such that she was a man, but not believed by him—indeed, disbelieved by him—under the other mode of presentation to be such that she was a man. He therefore believes both that George Eliot was a man and that George Eliot was not a man, and because he believes both propositions, he believes their conjunction, the contradiction *that George Eliot was a man and George Eliot was not a man*. Given the facts of the case, this belief is epistemically warranted. Jane, on the other hand, has no two modes of presentation of Eliot which she fails to take to be modes of presentation of the same person, and that is why she cannot rationally believe the same contradiction.

So far—perhaps—so good, but now I am in a position to state the problem I have in mind. (i) The Theorist is constrained to acknowledge that it may well be true that

- (a) Jane rationally believes both that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man and that he does not believe that Mary Ann Evans was a man.

After all, Jane may have heard Ralph insist ‘I believe that George Eliot was a man, but I certainly don’t believe that Mary Ann Evans was a man’ and taken him at his word. Besides, there can be no doubt that Jane may believe that the *sentence* ‘Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man but does not believe that Mary Ann Evans was a man’ is true, and she knows that ‘Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man but does not believe that Mary Ann Evans was a man’ means that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man but does not believe that Mary Ann Evans was a man. (ii) Suppose that (a)

is true. Since George Eliot = Mary Ann Evans, it would follow, if the Theory is true, that

(b) Jane rationally believes and disbelieves that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man.

(iii) But if the Theory is true, then the conjunction of (b) and the special-case consequence entails that

(c) George Eliot is rationally believed and disbelieved by *Jane* to be such that Ralph believes that she, Eliot, was a man.

(iv) Whence the problem: given (c), Frege's constraint requires Jane to have two modes of presentation of George Eliot which she, Jane, does not take to be modes of presentation of the same person, but by construction of the example, Jane does not have two such modes of presentation.

The problem for the Theory, in other words, is that a contradiction has been derived from the conjunction of the Theory, factual claims which are clearly possible—viz., (a) and Jane's not having two modes of presentation of George Eliot which she, Jane, does not take to be of the same person—and two principles to which the theory seems committed—viz., Frege's constraint and the special-case consequence. Therefore, to avoid the contradiction, the Theorist must deny either (1) the possibility of (a)'s being true, (2) the possibility, in the sort of case envisaged, of Jane's not having two modes of presentation of George Eliot which she, Jane, does not take to be of the same person, (3) the special-case consequence, or (4) Frege's constraint.

It may seem to the Theorist that she can opt for (4), that she has a way of denying Frege's constraint, at least as formulated in (A) and (B) above. To make clear what I have in mind, I must advert to a debate that Nathan Salmon and I had some years ago.

Salmon, and other Theorists with him, hold that believing is a two-place relation holding between believers and the Russellian propositions they believe, but that this two-place relation is defined in terms of a three-place relation $BEL(x, p, m)$ that holds among a person x , a Russellian proposition p , and a mode of presentation m : it is that relation that obtains when x believes the Russellian proposition p under the propositional mode of presentation m .⁶ Here the notion of a propositional mode of presentation should be understood functionally as whatever satisfies the definition

$$x \text{ believes } p \text{ iff } \exists m(BEL(x, p, m))$$

in a way that explains how x can rationally both believe and disbelieve p by virtue of there being distinct modes of presentation m and m' such that

$BEL(x, p, m)$ and $BEL(x, \sim p, m')$. In my article “The ‘Fido’-Fido Theory of Belief,”⁷ I raised an objection to Salmon’s theory which may be restated as the following argument:

- (1) Salmon’s version of the Theory is correct only if Jane rationally believes and disbelieves *that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man*.
- (2) Jane rationally believes and disbelieves *that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man* only if $\exists m, m'(BEL(\text{Jane, the proposition that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man, } m) \& BEL(\text{Jane, the proposition that Ralph does not believe that George Eliot was a man, } m'))$.
- (3) $\exists m, m'(BEL(\text{Jane, the proposition that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man, } m) \& BEL(\text{Jane, the proposition that Ralph does not believe that George Eliot was a man, } m'))$ only if Jane has modes of presentation of George Eliot which she, Jane, does not take to be modes of presentation of the same person.
- (4) Jane has no such modes of presentation of George Eliot.
- (5) \therefore Salmon’s version of the Theory is not correct.

The crucial premise of this valid inference is (3). It is based on two thoughts. The first is that the only reasonable construal of *propositional* modes of presentation is that they are structured entities whose basic components are modes of presentation of the basic components of the Russellian propositions of which the propositional modes of presentation are modes of presentation;⁸ and the second is that Frege’s constraint holds for those components, in the sense implied by (3).

In his reply to what was in effect the foregoing argument, Salmon denied premise (3), although it was not clear which of the two ideas on which it is based he wanted to reject. He would say that Jane believes *that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man* when that proposition is presented to her as the one expressed by ‘Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man’ but that she disbelieves that proposition when it is presented to her as the one expressed by ‘Ralph believes that Mary Ann Evans was a man’. David Braun would say something similar. He takes propositional modes of presentation to be sentences in a believer’s language of thought, so that, if Jane thinks in English, then she can believe and disbelieve *that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man* by virtue of having in her belief box both ‘Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man’ and ‘Ralph does not believe that Mary Ann Evans was a man’. On this construal, Jane can rationally believe and disbelieve *that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man* even though she has no two modes of presentation of Eliot/Evans which she, Jane, fails to take to be modes of presentation of the same person.⁹ Braun’s version, whereby propositional modes of presentation are sentences in a thinker’s language of thought, is the best version of the tack in question, since it

applies without finagling to unexpressed beliefs, and I shall henceforth take it to be part of the official reply to the just-displayed objection.

If, as Salmon and Braun would claim, (3) is false and Jane rationally believes and disbelieves that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man by, so to say, having in her belief box both ‘Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man’ and ‘Ralph does not believe that Mary Ann Evans was a man’, then, given the special-case consequence, it would follow that George Eliot is rationally believed and disbelieved by Jane to be such that Ralph believes that she, Eliot, was a man, and therefore that the (A)-(B) version of Frege’s constraint, formulated above, is false. The sustaining idea has two parts. The first is that a version of Frege’s constraint holds for *propositional* modes of presentation, in that x rationally believes and disbelieves $\langle \alpha, \Phi \rangle$ ¹⁰ only if there are modes of presentation m and m' of the proposition $\langle \alpha, \Phi \rangle$ such that, first, $\text{BEL}(x, \langle \alpha, \Phi \rangle, m) \ \& \ \text{BEL}(x, \langle \alpha, \sim \Phi \rangle, m')$ and, second, x takes m and m' to be modes of presentation of different propositions. The second part is that Frege’s constraint does *not* hold for the constituents of $\langle \alpha, \Phi \rangle$: x may rationally believe and disbelieve $\langle \alpha, \Phi \rangle$ even though x does not have two modes of presentation for either α or Φ which x takes to be modes of presentation of different things. This might be clarified in the following way.¹¹

A Theorist who *both* takes propositional modes of presentation to be sentences in a person’s language of thought *and* accepts the foregoing (A)-(B) version of Frege’s constraint will want to take modes of presentation of objects to be mentalese singular terms and to supplement Frege’s constraint with this criterion:

Let $\ulcorner S(t) \urcorner$ and $\ulcorner S(t') \urcorner$ be Mentalese sentences such that (a) they differ only in that one contains the singular term t where the other contains the singular term t' , and (b) each is true just in case the referent of its displayed singular term satisfies the open sentence $\ulcorner S(x) \urcorner$. Then you can rationally have in your belief box both $\ulcorner S(t) \urcorner$ and $\ulcorner \sim S(t') \urcorner$ only if your belief box does not also contain $\ulcorner t = t' \urcorner$.¹²

Such a Theorist, of course, cannot be Salmon or Braun, since the supplementary criterion would prevent Jane from rationally believing and disbelieving that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man. The Salmon-Braun position must be that one can rationally have in one’s belief box both $\ulcorner S(t) \urcorner$ and $\ulcorner \sim S(t') \urcorner$ *even though* one’s belief box also contains $\ulcorner t = t' \urcorner$.

The problem with the Salmon-Braun position is that it is quite unclear *how* one can rationally have $\ulcorner S(t) \urcorner$ and $\ulcorner \sim S(t') \urcorner$ in one’s belief box when one’s belief box also contains $\ulcorner t = t' \urcorner$, and, correlatively, quite unclear how this position can now explain why Jane cannot rationally have in her belief box both ‘George Eliot was a man’ and ‘Mary Ann Evans was not a man’ but Ralph can rationally have those two sentences in his belief box. For the

Theorist who accepts the just-displayed criterion, there is no mystery. Ralph can rationally have those two sentences in his belief box because his belief box contains ‘George Eliot \neq Mary Ann Evans’, but Jane cannot rationally have them in her belief because her belief box contains ‘George Eliot = Mary Ann Evans’. If propositional modes of presentation were taken to be *public language sentences or utterances*, then a Theorist might try to tell a story according to which Jane falsely but rationally believes that ‘Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man’ and ‘Ralph believes that Mary Ann Evans was a man’ express different propositions, notwithstanding the fact that she knows that ‘George Eliot’ and ‘Mary Ann Evans’ are names of the same person; but there would be at least two problems with such an attempt. First, Jane need not have any beliefs about the meanings of public language sentences. This is especially clear if we suppose that Jane is six years old. A six year old who knows that George Eliot’s real name was ‘Mary Ann Evans’ might believe that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man but that Mary Ann Evans was not a man, even though the child does not have the conceptual resources to have the needed beliefs about the propositions expressed by belief reports. Second, as I already suggested, the language-of-thought version of sentential modes of presentation is preferable to the public-language version owing to unexpressed beliefs (actually, there are other reasons as well), and it is not at all plausible to suppose that a thinker has beliefs about her *lingua mentis*, which cannot be assumed to be the same as her public language idiolect.

Here, then, is the final statement of the problem this paper has been concerned to raise. The Theorist is motivated to accept the special-case consequence and Frege’s constraint, formulated as conditions (A) and (B). But a contradiction can be derived from that together with what would seem to be undeniably possible facts. It may seem that the Theorist can avoid the contradiction by denying the (A)-(B) formulation of Frege’s constraint. But to do this, the Theorist must explain how one can rationally have in one’s belief box the three sentences ‘ $t = t$ ’, ‘ $S(t)$ ’, and ‘ $\sim S(t)$ ’, and it is not clear how he can explain this. My view,¹³ for what it is worth, is that of course Jane can rationally believe both that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man and that he does not believe that Mary Ann Evans was a man, even though Jane knows ‘George Eliot’ was Mary Ann Evans’s pen name. But this is because the proposition Jane believes is not the proposition she disbelieves, and thus she does not rationally or in any other way believe the contradiction that Ralph believes that George Eliot was a man and does not believe that George Eliot was a man.

Notes

¹ See e.g. Salmon (1986), Soames (2002), and Braun (1998).

² Not all direct-reference semanticists accept the Theory. Some direct-reference theorists, such as John Perry and Mark Crimmins, hold what I have elsewhere called the hidden-indexical

theory of belief reports, according to which an utterance of ‘Lester believes that Fido is a dog’ is true iff Lester believes <Fido, doghood> under a contextually determined mode of presentation or type of mode of presentation. The objection I am about to raise against the Theory is not an objection to the hidden-indexical theory; but that theory fails for sundry other reasons. See Crimmins and Perry (1989) and Schiffer (1992) and (2003).

³ I first called it this in Schiffer (1978).

⁴ Cf. Salmon (1989), p. 267.

⁵ Salmon (1989), p. 245.

⁶ See, e.g., Salmon (1986).

⁷ Schiffer (1987).

⁸ On this reckoning, a mode of presentation of the singular proposition $\langle \alpha, \Phi \rangle$ would in effect be the Fregean proposition $\langle m_\alpha, m_\Phi \rangle$, where m_α is a mode of presentation of α and m_Φ is a mode of presentation of Φ .

⁹ Braun (1998).

¹⁰ To disbelieve $\langle \alpha, \Phi \rangle$ is to believe its negation, $\langle \alpha, \sim\Phi \rangle$.

¹¹ I have not discussed modes of presentation for properties, but what has been said about modes of presentation for particulars applies to them as well. In the remainder of the paper I shall continue to ignore properties.

¹² A slightly different version of this criterion was presented in Schiffer (1990).

¹³ See Schiffer (2003).

References

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