FALLIBILISM, DEMONSTRATIVE THOUGHTS AND RUSSELLIAN PROPOSITIONS

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Abstract

Russellian or singular propositions are very useful in semantics to specify "what has been said" by a literal and serious utterance of a sentence containing a proper name, an indexical or a demonstrative, or for modeling demonstrative thoughts. Based on an example given by S. Guttenplan, I construct a case showing that if our only option for modeling demonstrative thoughts is a singular proposition à la Russell, we run the risk of admitting infallible *empirical (existential) beliefs. I defend the principle of the fallibility of our (first order) representations by appealing to Perry's notionof a* relational mode of presentation *that allows us to generalize the proposition which is the content of the perceptual belief in cases of hallucination or misidentification, so that there is no "immunity to error through misidentification" in the province of demonstrative thought.*

A Russellian (singular) proposition is a proposition which contains at least one object as constituent. Its identity depends upon the identity of the object itself, and not upon a Fregean mode of presentation of the object. These propositions work quite well to specify "what has been said" when the sentence used in an utterance contains a singular term like a proper name, a demonstrative or an indexical. Moreover, they are very appropriate to model demonstrative thoughts, thoughts we express by uttering sincerely sentences containing such singular terms. What would happen if Russellian propositions would be the only instrument available to model demonstrative thought, even an "apparent" demonstrative thought? I construct an example suggesting that one runs the risk of admitting something quite

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unacceptable: empirical, existential beliefs (or judgements) that are *infallible* without being *identification-free*. So there would be a class of beliefs (or judgements) "immune to error through misidentification" (to use S. Shoemaker's and G. Evans's phrase), and the worst is that they are not *identification-free*! In the first part, I state the problem, and in the second, I try to work out a solution combining a few intuitive ideas, mainly Perry's idea of a relational mode of presentation, and the idea that a demonstrative thought necessarily involves directly the very object to which the predicate applies; if there is no object at all, the thought is general and simply not demonstrative. The moral of the story is that singular propositions, though useful in semantics, cannot serve in the case under discussion, and that we should adopt a more practical stance in semantics, for the determination and interpretation of the mental content of the attitudes of our fellows. Finally, I claim, too, that the first person point of view, however important, is not always decisive in semantics or epistemology, and on that point I take side with the externalists.

1. The Problem

Theories of Intentionality, since Brentano, seem to agree with an intuitive principle that I shall call, taking inspiration from McGinn [1982] or Recanati [1993], the Principle of the Fallibility of our (first order)[1] Representations (PFR). Representing always involves the possibility of misrepresenting. This is what Dretske called "the Power to Misrepresent" [1995]. For any judgement or belief whose content has the form *a is F*, we can be mistaken either because the object denoted by *a* does not have the represented property expressed by *F* or because *a* simply does not exist. In the logico-linguistic interpretation of Brentano's thesis by Chisholm [1956, 1957], we cannot usually apply existential generalization to sentences ascribing propositional attitudes, at least when the attitudes are *de dicto*. A very naive person could be searching for an honest man, without realising that there is no (logical) guarantee that there is at least one. There is, consequently, a well-known sense of "about" according to which my representation can be about a unicorn, or a non-existent state of

affairs, or a property deprived of any instance, etc. Of course, most of the time, our thoughts are about things that exist, either in our immediate environment or in distant galaxies.

Here a sceptic could say, "How do you know that?" and sometimes it looks like a good question to ask. But Wittgenstein's lesson in *On Certainty* is precisely that we need good reasons, not only to justify our beliefs, but also to doubt. Without good reasons to doubt, the language-game of doubting is futile. Frege, in "On Sense and Reference", answered the sceptic's question "How do you know that the referent of the word "moon" does exist?" in the following terms: I simply *suppose* (or *presuppose*) that the moon does exist, and of course, in any serious thinking and literal discourse, we do it all the time for any referent of the singular terms we use. And it seems to me that this answer is perfect as it stands.

Be that as it may, in principle, the traditional theories of Intentionality seem to admit that we can always *individuate* our contentful mental states "internally" or "narrowly", in a way that *does not logically entail or presuppose the existence of anything beyond the bearer of these states*. (Remember: The content of a mental state is usually specified by a complementing "that"-clause in the scope of a verb of attitude. When a speaker sincerely uses a sentence to express, say, a belief, we then have the right to use exactly the same sentence — or a grammatical transformation of it — to ascribe to him the belief in question).

Externalism recently brought something new in the theory of Intentionality. It denies that many of our mental states can be individuated in the way just described. In other words, we cannot, seriously and literally, describe all our mental life without referring to objects existing in our environment. Externalism in the Philosophy of Mind, as I see it, represents the extension, in the study of mind, of the logico-linguistic study of context-dependency, the main topic in the Philosophy of Language of the second half of the twentieth century. A great part, arguably almost all of our representations, is context-sensitive — except, may be, the mental tokens of eternal sentences. Most philosophers, in the theory of demonstrative thoughts (or indexical beliefs, or *de re* attitudes), followed Russell and his idea of "singular proposition", where one object (in the

simplest case) is itself a constituent of the proposition asserted. And I think that singular propositions are very useful tools for describing our own mental life or that of our fellows, especially for demonstrative thought. As we shall see, when a sentence contains a demonstrative, an indexical or a proper name, we do not associate to these singular terms any Fregean *Sinn* or mode of presentation; for these singular terms, our semantic knowledge determines only the referent as a semantic value. This seems to be the only way to specify, in these cases, "what has been said". So the individuation of a demonstrative thought, say a perceptual belief that Jones would express sincerely by saying "That bird is a greenfinch" (a Guttenplan's example), pointing at a branch in a tree, logically presupposes the existence of the very object the thought is about (the bird present in Jones' environment), which then counts as a constituent of the thought itself.

Suppose now that Twin-Jones on Twin-Earth is seeing a qualitatively identical bird — a bird with the same phenotype or "stereotype" —, but with a different DNA, and produces sincerely a token of the same sentence. We should not evaluate semantically Twin-Jones' assertion (or belief) using the Earthian English word "greenfinch", or we should then say that Twin-Jones made a false assertion (or expressed a false perceptual belief). According to Externalism the content, and so the truth-value of a belief, can change with the environment. And the difference could be explained by the fact that Jones' belief has a particular bird as constituent —the bird itself, not a Fregean mode of presentation of it—, while Twin-Jones' belief has another one, with a different internal structure, as a constituent.

So far, so good. Suppose now that Jones misperceived the whole situation: He never really saw a bird, but the movements of a colourful leaf in the tree. Furthermore, suppose he then takes his binoculars to have a better look at one of his favourite bird. Now, according to "Strong Externalism" (as McGinn [1989] called it), Jones could not have the belief in question, because the bird itself, which is a constituent of the content of the belief, is simply not there. No bird, no constituent, and therefore no belief. No belief at all. But Jones acted (took the binoculars) upon the belief that the bird in the tree (in front of him) is a greenfinch. So in this situation his action turns out

to be completely unexplainable or irrational: He acted upon ... no belief at all!

Strong Externalism seems right about demonstrative thoughts in general, but here there is an obvious conflict with PFR. If Jones really has the belief in question, he cannot be mistaken as to the existential presupposition that the object of his mental or linguistic reference is really there, and if he is mistaken in this respect, he does not have the belief at all. So he cannot be mistaken either! So there would be existential empirical beliefs or judgements infallible and that would not be *identification-free...*[2]

(Allow me to make a few comments on the statement of the problem. The existential empirical belief (or judgement) that there is a bird (over there in the tree) is obtained in two steps: First, as the result of applying the existential generalization to the belief expressed by the sentence "that bird is a greenfinch", that is, $\exists x[\text{bird}(x) \wedge \text{greenfinch}(x)]$; and second, by eliminating the conjunction (which is a theorem of quantification theory) to get: $\exists x[\text{bird}(x)]$.

Moreover, there is the question whether this result is "cognitively realised". To that I would say: "Yes", because existential generalization and conjunction elimination are "immediate inferences", and, for sure, they are always *tenable* (in the sense that the conclusion is always weaker than the premises); in other words, there are more content and truth-conditions in the premises than in the conclusion, and the truth-conditions of the conclusion are completely included in those of the premises. When the inference is not immediate, the situation is different. From *S* believes that if *P* then *Q*, and *S* believes that *P*, it does not follow that *S* believes that *Q*, because, in general, there cannot be any logical guarantee that the belief that *Q* will actually be formed. But when the inference is immediate, I would say that we couldn't have the belief that *that bird is a greenfinch* without having the belief that *something is both a bird and a greenfinch*; and then you cannot have the belief that something is both a bird and a greenfinch without having the belief that there is an *x* such that *x* is a bird. So, *if we model demonstrative thought using exclusively the idea of a Russellian proposition, which is generally very attractive, we get the problem here described:* If there is a bird in the tree, you can be wrong about the specie of the bird (it could

be a cardinal, an oriole, etc.), but your existential judgement that there is a bird over there is not wrong; and if there is no bird in the tree, you do not have the belief at all because a constituent is lacking; so the existential generalization does not apply, and you cannot be wrong too, since you do not have the belief in the first place.)

2. Searching for a Solution

I shall now try to work out, in a very sketchy way of course, a solution that preserves and combines a few intuitive ideas. Firstly, I think that Frege's answer to the sceptic is fundamentally right. We *presuppose* all the time, at least when we talk and think *seriously*, that the objects of our mental and linguistic references do exist. By "seriously" I mean here the following: "Most of the time, we worry about the *truth-conditions* of our beliefs and assertions, and we really wonder whether they do obtain or not". This particularly matters for us as agents, when we do act on the basis of our beliefs. I mean: we only act when we can reasonably hold them true, because, as agents, we always want to engage in successful courses of actions. (I'll not discuss here degrees of belief in the Bayesian vein, but it is obvious that not all our beliefs are "flat out" beliefs). So, I take it for granted that when Jones, a rational man, takes the binoculars to have a better look at his favourite bird, he clearly presupposes that there is a bird in the tree. Otherwise, he wouldn't undertake the course of actions just described.

Secondly, it seems to me that we need singular propositions in semantics. In general, they are very useful tools to describe and assess what we say and think. *But clearly they cannot be used to describe Jones' situation.* Suppose I tell you: "I live in João Pessoa/Brazil", and you tell me: "You live in João Pessoa/Brazil", and then someone in the audience says, pointing at me: "He lives in João Pessoa/Brazil", these three utterances express one and the same true singular proposition that contains myself as a constituent, not a mode of presentation of me. An utterance of "André Leclerc lives in João Pessoa/Brazil" would still express the same proposition. Direct reference

won enormous influence in philosophy of language and mind because of the obvious drawbacks of the Fregean theory of reference for proper names, indexicals and demonstratives. In a purely semantic theory of reference, there is no way to assign a Fregean ("absolute") mode of presentation to a proper name that would not be totally arbitrary. In a given context of use a speaker may very well choose a mode of presentation for the name "Aristotle", but clearly his choice will depend upon his personal (encyclopaedic) knowledge of Aristotle, not upon the knowledge of the rules and conventions of his language. Perry ("Frege on Demonstratives" [1977], in Perry [1993]) pointed out a similar problem for demonstratives and indexicals, that is, the lack of a "completing Fregean sense" for these singular (non-descriptive) terms. The utterances about me just mentioned involves a successful reference to me, not because of a linguistic (absolute) mode of presentation conventionally associated with "I" (when I say "I"), or with "you" (when you say "you" talking to me), or with "he" (when someone says "he" pointing at me) or with my proper name. As far as semantics is concerned, there are no Fregean modes of presentation conventionally associated with these singular terms that are sufficient to uniquely determine the referent in context, by specifying a condition or an aspect that the referent has to satisfy precisely to be the referent. But we should, I think, accept that there are, as Perry [1990] advanced, at a genuine semantic level, *relational modes of presentation* that determine the referent as the object that stands in a certain relation to the use of an expression in an utterance. The referent of "you", for instance, is the person who satisfies a description like "the only x such that x is the addressee in the actual context of use of the word 'you' ". This relational mode of presentation, of course, needs not be part of the "official semantic content" or part of the "mental content". So, for example, when you hear a woman screaming, from the next building: "Oh! You are so mean!", you know that the utterance expresses a true proposition if and only if the addressee in the context is mean. But it is clear that in one important sense, you don't know fully "what has been said", because you just don't know your neighbours or the addressee. Perhaps the woman is the middle of a rehearsal for a piece of theatre and no one really satisfies the description associated with the utterance of "you"

in the context. But if she is a good actress, you will almost pick up the phone and call the cops...

What about "That bird is a greenfinch"? "That bird" would have a relational mode of presentation: The only *x* such that *x* is a bird and *x* is indicated by the speaker of the utterance of "that bird". The speaker can have other modes of presentation, not linguistic but psychological, for instance a visual mode of presentation, of the bird he is pointing at. Normally, such modes of presentation would be *de re* when the perception is "veridical" and the object is really there. But when the perception is not veridical and there is no object, of course, the mode of presentation cannot be *de re* or object-dependent.

It seems to me that to represent correctly Jones' situation and to explain his action, it is important that he really has a belief, and that the belief on which he acted be considered as false, because a false belief is still a belief on which someone can rationally act, presupposing (mistakenly) that it is true, while an "illusory belief" or a "mock belief" or a "pretend belief", are beliefs only in a very special sense — I would say in a "degenerated sense". Frege thought of empty singular terms or empty modes of presentation on the model of fiction, but, of course, no one would rationally and seriously act upon a "pretend belief" or a "mock belief". But here, the consistency of the very idea of an empty mode of presentation, a mode of presentation that does not present anything, and that would be a constituent of the content of a mock belief, has been challenged by G. Evans [1982], and then by J. McDowell [1984]. As to the concept of an "illusory thought" or "pseudo-belief", it seems to me that such beliefs are not beliefs at all, contrary to a false belief. In the same way, we would not say of a hallucinatory or deceived visual experience that it is a perception of nothing; we would say, of course, that it is not a perception at all. But what might seem perplexing is this case is that we can act upon a hallucination. However, when this happens to us, we don't know we are hallucinating, and we are *presupposing* all the way that we are really seeing something. When we have a "mock belief" of the kind mentioned by Frege, we are clearly not presupposing that the objects of our "mock references" really do exist. In fictional cases, we know there is no object corresponding to the singular terms we use, and for that reason, in the Frege-Strawson conception of presupposition, our

mock thoughts have no truth-value. But in Jones' case, which could happen in real life, it seems more natural to say he acted on the basis of a false belief. Jones' belief cannot have a singular proposition as its content because one of the constituents is lacking. But Jones' belief must have content. May be the best candidate would be what Perry [1997] recently called "content$_m$" ("*m*" for meaning). The content would have, as constituents, concepts introduced by a definite description and the property of being a greenfinch. So we would have: The only *x* such that *x* is a bird and *x* is indicated by the speaker of the utterance of "that bird" and *x* is a greenfinch. This is not the "official content" of Jones' belief; his thought does not have any metalinguistic element, was never about an utterance of "that bird", etc. But as semantics is concerned, we can ascribe to Jones, at least as a first step, a belief with this content to explain both his behaviour and his deception. That seems a reasonable way to preserve his rationality. If it does not work, may be the explanation of the case under discussion in not at all a job for a philosopher semanticist.

Semantics is the best guide we have (arguably the only one) for our investigations in ontology and mental content. But don't follow the guide blindly! Singular propositions are in general useful in the theory of demonstrative thoughts. But Jones had a belief (not an illusory or mock belief), and he acted upon it. However, it is false (*there is* no bird in the tree) and cannot have a singular proposition as its content. Instead, *the proposition is general*, as a first step of semantic evaluation. And this first step captures enough truth-conditions to explain Jones' behaviour. In this case, we cannot go further in the semantic evaluation and try to fill up all the contextual parameters (for instance to fix the referent of "that bird").

I want to reject here an objection against Russellian propositions in the theory of demonstrative thought, an objection based on something similar to the "Argument From Illusion". From his first person perspective, Jones believes he is seeing a bird, and cannot tell the difference between his actual situation and one in which he would be really seeing a greenfinch. He acts *as if* there were a bird over there in the tree. But there is none. So the proposition that is the content of his belief *must be general*. However, it is sufficient to explain Jones' behaviour. So why would we need singular propositions at all if ge-

neral propositions can do the job, as the example shows us? I think that move is not wise. Propositions are artefacts we created to keep tracking truth-conditions; we should not give up one of them just because it cannot be use in all situations. We should be more practical and refuse to impoverish our semantic toolbox on behalf of a would-be, big, systematic view of language. Of course, we should preserve as far as possible certain basic features of our language, like compositionality. My point is simply that the first person point of view, in semantics, is not always decisive, and we should refuse the radicalism of the First-Person-Third Person opposition. Until he discovered his own misidentification, Jones cannot say if the content of his belief is a singular or a general proposition from his own epistemic perspective; but we should not accept that the content of his belief should be evaluate only from the first person point of view. For Semantic Externalism, the first person point of view is not always decisive in semantical matters.

Finally, of course, we do not enjoy *immunity to error through misidentification* in the province of demonstrative thought, at least for judgements that are not identification-free.[3]

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Notes

[1] I do not want to discuss here the question whether second-order (or introspective) representations are infallible or not.

[2] There are two kinds of identification: one is *descriptive* (when the object is not there); and the other is *demonstrative* (used when the object is present). When I use the expression "identification-free" here, I mean, of course, free of *descriptive* identification, like "This one is square", pointing to a table (where the pointing is a sufficient demonstrative identification in the context of utterance). Demonstrative identification is a much stronger way of identifying the referent; it avoids what Strawson called a "massive reduplication" of a "sector of the universe", (see *Individuals*, p. 20). As McGinn says, "indexicality cannot be captured non-indexically" (*Logical Properties*, p. 46). Moreover, contrary to descriptive identification, the object I am pointing at could not be a different object in a counterfactual situation or possible world. So "that bird is a greenfinch" is not identification-free in this sense because it contains a general descriptive term ("bird"). It is, of course, the presence of a general term that gives rise to the possibility of misidentification.

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