

Is Belief a Propositional Attitude?

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Is someone believing that p standing in some relation to (the proposition) that p?

A bad reason for thinking so:

From
(1) Huey believes that snow is white.
(2) Dewey believes that grass is green.
(3) Louie believes that grass is green.
we can infer
(4) Both Huey and Dewey believe something.
(5) There is something that both Dewey and Louie believe.
From
(6) Huey is believing.
we can infer
(7) There is something that Huey believes.
But we can also infer from (1*) Huey runs at 8 mph, (2*) Dewey runs at 10 mph, and (3*) Louie runs at 10 mph, that
(4*) Both Huey and Dewey run at a certain speed.
(5*) There is some speed at which both Dewey and Louie run.
And from (6*) Huey is running, we can infer
(7*) There is some speed at which Huey runs.
But running is not standing in a relation to a speed.

A reason to think that believing that p is not standing in a relation to (the proposition) that p (though perhaps it's standing in a relation to the objects (the proposition) that p is about):

Truthmaker maximalists hold that truth is a derelativisation of the relation of being made true, though not itself relational. The things made true are plausibly taken to be sentence-tokens or inscriptions, that are made true in some specific way: The inscription "Huey ate the cookies on the couch", e.g., is made true by some cookie-eating event as an inscription of English and as specifying the location of either Huey or the cookies.

Analogously, an adverbial theory of belief might hold that belief is a derelativisation of a broader and conceptually prior notion of acceptance, in which sentence-tokens stand to believers in certain ways. Believing that p is a matter of there being a sentence-token that is accepted in a certain way (i.e. the way in which, if it were true, would be made true).

Two immediate problems arise:

1. The famous translation argument, going back to Frege and expanded by Church (1950) and Bigelow (1980) against sententialist and paratactic theories of belief ascription seems applicable: (i) if the relata of acceptance are sentence-tokens, (1) and

(8) Tick glaubt, dass Schnee weiss ist.

involve relations to different sentences. Moreover, (ii) the acceptance of "Snow is white" by Huey can only underlie the truth of (1) if we presuppose that, in it, "snow" means snow rather than, say, grass. But the claim is not that

(9) Huey accepts some sentence-inscription which means that snow is white.

is synonymous with (1), or conceptually equivalent with it, or an explication of what is implicit in (1). (9) rather specifies some truthmaker for (1): it is a metaphysical analysis of (1) and their correlation a substantial thesis.

2. The adverbial theory seems committed to (i) ascribing beliefs only to language-using creatures and (ii) only in contents for which some inscription may be found. Against (ii), the adverbialist may claim that the accepted inscription is produced in (1). To avoid (i), the relation of acceptance has to be construed as passive (Cohen 1992) and as a more general attitude than belief as ordinarily construed, which "comes apart from belief in cases where one is warranted in acting on the assumption that p or taking it for granted that p or trusting that p for reasons that do not bear on the likely truth of p" (Wright 2004: 177). So construed, we may say that (intelligent) dogs accept sentence-tokens and accordingly have beliefs.