

The Cognitive Reality of Propositions and the Measure Theory of Mind

Amongst the most difficult problems for the *relational view of propositional attitude reports* is to explain the nature of the cognitive relation that thinkers have to propositions in order that they may bear the propositional attitude relations that propositional attitude reports report them as bearing. One promise of the *measure theory of mind* is supposed to be that it can provide a relational view of propositional attitude reports without providing a relational view of the propositional attitudes themselves. According to the measure theory, it will not follow from the relational nature of the attitude report that the facts reported are relational in nature, and thus it will not follow that propositional attitudes are *cognitive* relations to propositions, cognitive relations whose nature needs to be explained. On this kind of measure theory of mind, propositions are *essential* to making sense of our talk of propositional attitudes, but they are merely *instrumental* for making sense of the attitudes themselves. The measure theory in this way *dissolves* one of the most difficult problems that faces the relational view of propositional attitude reports.

I will argue that this promise of the measure theory cannot be realized. I will give two arguments for this conclusion. The first argument is an argument from the *normativity of the mental*. The second argument is from the *nature of intentional explanation*. Both arguments lead to the conclusion that measuring minds with propositions is partially constituted by a cognitively real relation to a proposition. The lost promise of the measure theory need not sink the measure theory. What follows from the arguments is either that the measure theory should be given up or the measure theory should be developed in a realist, rather than instrumentalist, spirit. In this paper, I do not pursue the conclusion further.

One way of showing this kind of measure theory to be mistaken would be to show that propositional attitude reports somehow require that the thinker or *attributee* bear some cognitive relation to a proposition. But another way to show that such a view must be mistaken would be to show that propositional attitude reports somehow require that the reporter or *attributor* bear some cognitive relation to a proposition. Against the second possibility, Davidson (1991: ‘What is Present to the Mind, *Philosophical Issues*, 203) writes:

Someone who attributes a thought to another must, I have argued, relate that other to some object, and so the attributor must of course identify an appropriate object either by pointing to it or by describing it. But there is no reason why the attributor must stand in any special relation to the identifying object; all he has to do is to refer to it in the way that he refers to anything else.

I argue against Davidson and for the view that propositional attitude reports somehow require that the reporter or *attributor* bear some cognitive relation to a proposition.

To motivate the first argument consider the following remarks by Tyler Burge (2011: ‘Self and Self-Understanding, *Journal of Philosophy*, 336) concerning the kind of self-understanding that is required of thinkers that are capable of critical reasoning about their “perspectives”:

...self-understanding must be specific—from the inside. To ground norms of morality and critical reason, the self-understanding must specify psychological states in ways that preserve the point of view to be evaluated. The specifications must enable one to know what the point of view is on its own terms. Since the norms concern the perspective of the individual, an understanding that did not preserve the mode and content of the evaluated psychological elements would be too detached to render the norms applicable.

The first argument hinges on a conception of mind as a normative domain. Minds are the objects of critical normative evaluations that demand that minds normatively regulate themselves. This normative self-regulation requires metarepresentations of mindedness that involve reporting one’s own attitudes to oneself, not just in any way, but in a way that is explicit about the propositional

attitude, including the proposition. This explicitness is essential to the normative self-regulation of a mind because it allows the self-regulating mind to regulate “on its own terms”. Without such explicit metarepresentation “on its own terms” norms of critical reason would not be applicable.

- P1. Measurement of minds is a measurement of a normative domain
- P2. The normativity of the mental domain partly consists in a special kind of *metarepresentation* in which a kind of not only direct but *explicit* reference to propositions is made.
- P3. Explicit reference to propositions is reference in which thinking *about* a proposition is partially constituted by *understanding* the very proposition that is being thought about.
- P4. Understanding a proposition is a cognitively real relation to a proposition.
- C. Measuring minds with proposition is partially constituted by a cognitively real relation to a proposition

Davidson goes wrong at P2. To refer in the explicit, ‘that’-clause sort of way to a proposition is not “to refer to it in the way that [one] refers to anything else”.

To motivate the second argument consider the following remarks by Hartry Field (2001: ‘Attributions of Meaning and Content’ in his *Truth and the Absence of Fact*, 162-163), in the course of expounding his view that meaning and attitude attributions relate thinkers to sentences that the attributor understands (“the linguistic view”).

A[n] interesting set of issues to raise about the linguistic view is its implications about explanation: in particular, the fact that if we explain what a person does in terms of her belief that *p*, the linguistic construal has it that we are in a sense bringing ourselves into the explanation...in order to use Rebecca’s beliefs in any normal explanation of her behavior you must be able to supply a sentence you understand...that expresses her belief: you must be able to say ‘she believes that *p*’, where ‘*p*’ is a sentence you understand. Being able to designate the proposition Rebecca believes in some other way (e.g. via a sentence you don’t understand, or a list of possible worlds, or a name like Horace) would be of no use to us in our normal explanatory practice. (Objection: ‘That’s because these wouldn’t tell me *which proposition it is*.’ Response: Maybe, but if so, that’s because our standard for *knowing which proposition it is that the belief expresses is being able to supply a sentence we understand that expresses the proposition...*)

Now Field makes this point in the course of defending his linguistic view, but the point is independent of the linguistic versus propositional debate on meaning and attitude attributions. In particular the point can be captured in a propositionalist framework by saying that in attributing a propositional attitude, one relates a thinker not to a proposition specified in just *any* way, but in a way that draws on the understanding of the attributor of the very proposition to which the thinker is being related. The real point is not about linguistic attributions, but that explanations and reasoning about the propositional attitudes of others involves relating them to something that one oneself understands. Understanding others is relating them to something that one oneself understands.

If this is right, then although explanations and reasoning about propositional attitudes are in a sense *surrogative* (cf. Matthews 2011: ‘Measurement-Theoretic Accounts of the Propositional Attitudes’, *Philosophy Compass*, 831) in that one’s *own* understanding stands in as a surrogate for the understanding of others, this is distinct, and more cognitively committed, than the sense in which measurements reports allow are surrogative. It is not reasoning about one domain with just any other; it is reasoning about one domain with another *that one understands*.

- P1. Propositional attitude reports allow for surrogative reasoning not (or not only) in the sense that one reasons about the minds of others by reasoning about the propositions that are their representatives, but in the sense that one relates them to propositions that one oneself understands.
- P2. Understanding a proposition is a cognitively real relation to a proposition.
- C. Measuring minds with propositions is partially constituted by a cognitively real relation to a proposition.

Davidson goes wrong at P2. Davidson is wrong about there being “no reason why the attributer must stand in any special relation to” a proposition.