

Foundations for a Metasemantic Theory of De Se Content

Humans, at least, can have different attitudes—like believing, desiring, or hoping—toward different things. One can believe, for example, that Saint Petersburg is in Russia or that chocolate is good for health. Attitudes are representational mental states that *are about/directed onto* other entities in the world like wrestler films, chocolate, etc. This raises at least two interesting questions regarding the content—what is believed or desired—of our attitudes.

1. What kind(s) of things are the content of our attitudes?
2. What makes it the case that a particular mental state represents another entity (rather than nothing)?

I will call (1) 'the semantic question' and (2) the 'metasemantic question'.

The traditional reply to the semantic question is that *propositions* are the content of our attitudes. There is some disagreement about what propositions are supposed to be, but it is widely accepted that they are the kind of thing that is evaluable as true or false relative to a possible world (leaving it open the possibility that propositions might lack truth value). They thereby make partitions among possible worlds in the space of possibilities; i.e. they determine sets of possible worlds. Importantly, propositions's truth value is traditionally taken not to vary from person to person, place to place or time to time.

In section 1 I introduce *de se* attitudes and show that they raise a puzzle for this traditional view on propositions. One possible solution is to accept that the content of *de se* attitudes is not a proposition classically understood but rather a *centered proposition*, which truth value changes from one person to another. Centered propositions do not determine sets of possible worlds, as propositions do, but sets of pairs of possible worlds and individuals. Centered propositions are settled, following

Lewis, by the self-attribution of properties; that is to say, by the representation of oneself as having certain properties.

This possible reply to the semantic question leaves the metasemantic questions unanswered. A reply to this question requires to provide an understanding of what it takes to self-attribute a certain property. Considering that sets of possible worlds are typically determined by the attribution of properties to objects, naturalistic theories of mental content are promising in explaining how we do that; that is to say, in explaining how we become to be in states with propositional content. But in section 2 I will argue that current theories fail to explain self-attribution, given that the later is not reducible to the former. I argue that current naturalistic theories can provide, at the most, a characterization of mental states whose truth conditions are relative to a spatiotemporal location, what, as I show, is not sufficient for characterizing the content of the beliefs we have about ourselves. An extra element is required to construct the desired metasemantic theory. My suggestion is to make use of conscious states to ground the desired theory.

Some might reasonably worry that grounding something puzzling in something more problematic—at least from a naturalistic perspective—doesn't seem to be a recommended route to follow. To avoid this kind of worries, in section 3 I propose phenomenal states as building blocks for constructing the desired theory of self-ascription in two steps. I first argue that the content of experience is *de se*: the correctness conditions of our experience concern the very same subject that is having the experience as such. In a second step I present a naturalistic theory of *de se* content in the particular case of conscious experiences. According to the proposal, conscious states are complexes constituted by what I will call 'proto-qualitative state' and the 'proto-self'. The proto-self is a brain structure that has the function of regulating the homeostatic processes of the organism. Proto-qualitative states are representational states that attribute properties to objects and therefore, according to the arguments presented along the paper, they do not suffice for having an experience. It is the interaction between these two structures what constitute a conscious state and what gives rise to a mental state with *de se* content: the content is not just that the object is disposed to cause the proto-qualitative state (in normal conditions) but that the object is disposed to cause the proto-qualitative state *in me*, in *the very same organism that the proto-self regulates*.