

De Re Senses

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DE RE SENSES

BY JOHN McDOWELL

1. It is commonly believed that a Fregean philosophy of language and thought can represent an utterance, or a propositional attitude, as being about an object only by crediting it with a content that determines the object by specification, or at least in such a way that the content is available to be thought or expressed whether the object exists or not.¹ To resist this restriction would be to hold out for the idea that utterances and thoughts can be essentially *de re*; and that idea is supposed to be incapable of being made to fit within the framework provided by the theory of sense and *Bedeutung*.

I believe that this picture of the possibilities for Fregean theory is quite wrong. Gareth Evans has argued that Frege himself is positively committed to *de re* senses for singular terms, and at least to some extent recognizes the commitment; and Evans has given the outlines of a perfectly Fregean account of some sorts of *de re* sense.² My purpose in this paper is not to repeat or embellish Evans's positive considerations, but to criticize a theoretical structure within which they are bound to seem incomprehensible.

2. What supposedly rules out accommodating the essentially *de re* within Fregean theory is a certain conception of the contrast between *de re* and *de dicto*. I shall follow Tyler Burge's exposition, which is the most explicit and thoughtful that I know.³

At the level of logical form, the contrast is between *de dicto* attributions of, say, belief, which relate the believer to a "complete" (343) or "completely expressed" (345) proposition, and *de re* attributions, which relate the believer to a *res* and something less than a "complete" proposition. Underlying this semantic distinction is an "epistemic" distinction (345–6): this is between beliefs that are "fully conceptualized" (345: *de dicto*), and beliefs "whose

¹ This latter formulation cannot be right where the object's existence is necessary absolutely, or necessary relative to the fact that the thought in question is being expressed or entertained at all (e.g. the *Bedeutung* on an occasion of 'now', and perhaps 'I': but see Evans, pp. 249–55). But having noted this, I shall ignore it: the issue I want to consider is whether Fregean theory can accommodate *de re* thoughts outside that area.

² Evans, Chs. 1, 6, and 7.

³ See Burge2: page references in my text will relate to this article.

correct ascription places the believer in an appropriate nonconceptual, contextual relation to objects the belief is about" (346: *de re*).

It would be a merely terminological question whether one should say that there are no propositions but "complete" ones, so that *de re* attributions involve no propositions; or whether in connection with *de re* attributions one should recognize propositions of a different kind: "Russellian propositions", which are not "completely expressed" but contain objects as constituents along with "expressed" items that are less than "complete" propositions.⁴ The second choice brings out neatly why Fregean theory cannot countenance the essentially *de re*, conceived on these lines. In Fregean theory, utterances and propositional attitudes have thoughts as their contents, and thoughts are senses with nothing but senses as constituents: "we can't say that an object is part of a thought as a proper name is part of the corresponding sentence" (PW, p. 187).

3. Burge's fundamental intuition is this: if a propositional attitude (or utterance) is essentially *de re*, that is in virtue of the fact that a context involving the *res* itself enters into determining how the attitude (or utterance) can be correctly ascribed.⁵

But why should the essentially *de re*, conceived in conformity with this intuition, be deemed inaccessible to Frege? Frege writes:

If a time indication is conveyed by the present tense one must know when the sentence was uttered in order to grasp the thought correctly. Therefore the time of utterance is part of the expression of the thought. (LI, p. 10)

Again, in connection with 'yesterday' and 'today', and 'here' and 'there', he writes:

In all such cases the mere wording, as it can be preserved in writing, is not the complete expression of the thought; the knowledge of certain conditions accompanying the utterance, which are used as means of expressing the thought, is needed for us to grasp the thought correctly. (*ibid.* See also pp. 27–8.)

He is writing of thoughts which are not completely expressed by words abstracted from contexts of utterance, but he is precisely *not* conceding that the

⁴ "Russellian propositions" in view of, e.g., p. 103 of *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, in *Russell's Logical Atomism*, ed. D. Pears (London, 1972). Burge remarks (343): "In Russellian propositions, the relevant *res* are not expressed but shown." His own formalizations of *de re* attributions do not group their relata, aside from the believer, into Russellian propositions, but a trivial notational change would make them do so.

⁵ Burge does not discuss utterances, but the extrapolation is natural. My formulation avoids another merely terminological issue, about the word 'content'. One might count Russellian propositions (if one believed in them) as a species of content; alternatively, one might tie content to "complete" propositionality, so that an attitude's *de re* character would come out in the fact that its content falls short of a whole proposition. Burge's preference is for the second of these: see n. 2 (p. 119) of his "Other Bodies", in *Thought and Object*, ed. A. Woodfield (Oxford, 1982), 97–120.

thoughts are not completely expressed, *simpliciter*. So where Burge speaks of a *res*-involving context partly determining the shape of a correct *de re* attribution, it is not clear why this cannot be transposed, in the light of this passage from Frege, into a conception of how such a context contributes to the expression of a fully expressible but nevertheless *de re* thought.

It is sometimes supposed that the “thoughts” of this passage cannot be classically Fregean thoughts. This idea is a response to Frege’s allowing that if one utters a sentence containing ‘yesterday’ one can express the same thought as one could have expressed on the day before by uttering a sentence containing ‘today’; the idea is that this same thought would be, not a Fregean thought, but a Russellian proposition, containing the day in question as a constituent.⁶

However, if Frege had intended to alter his use of ‘*Gedanke*’ so radically as to encompass these Russellian propositions, he would surely have remarked on it. (That is putting it mildly, since the alteration would undermine the fundamental point of his notion of sense, which includes thought: namely to capture differences in cognitive value. One can take opposing “cognitive” attitudes simultaneously to one of these Russellian propositions. See Perry, pp. 482–5) If there were no alternative explanation of what Frege is driving at, we might be forced to suppose that he has slipped inadvertently into a non-Fregean use of ‘*Gedanke*’. But there is an alternative explanation. Evans has suggested that Frege’s idea is this: if one “keeps track of” a day as it recedes into the past, thinking of it successively as *today*, *yesterday*, *the day before yesterday*, and so on, that enables one to hold on to thoughts about it – thoughts that preserve their identity through the necessary changes in how they might be expressed.⁷ These “dynamic thoughts” are not Russellian propositions; not just any mode of presentation of the day in question would demand the appropriate capacity to keep track of it, so a dynamic thought is not determined by the sheer identity of its object.⁸

⁶ David Kaplan takes this view in his unpublished “Demonstratives” (at least in the 1977 version); so also (by implication) John Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 229. On this reading, Frege’s remarks would amount to suggesting that if we give due weight to the expressing role of “accompanying conditions”, we can allow that even Russellian propositions can be completely expressed. If accepted, this would disrupt Burge’s apparatus; but it would not vindicate the possibility of a genuinely Fregean approach to the *de re*.

⁷ See G. Evans, “Understanding Demonstratives”, in *Meaning and Understanding*, ed. H. Parret and J. Bouveresse (Berlin and New York, 1981), 280–303, pp. 291–5. One can take opposing “cognitive” attitudes to one of these “dynamic thoughts”, but not simultaneously, and there is a perfectly Fregean explanation of how it happens: by losing track of the object, one loses track of the thought.

⁸ Note how Evans’s reading of the passage answers Colin McGinn’s query, McGinn, pp. 61–3: if, as Frege allows, a ‘yesterday’-utterance and a ‘today’-utterance, or a ‘here’-utterance and a ‘there’-utterance, can express the same thought, why not an ‘I’-utterance and a ‘you’-utterance? The answer is that an ‘I’-utterance and a ‘you’-utterance could not be connected by expressing a single dynamic thought. This preempts McGinn’s speculatively Cartesian answer to his query (pp. 63–4).

4. If we had only the linguistic expression of thoughts to consider, it would be somewhat mysterious why Burge assumes – contrary to the apparently reasonable line that Frege himself, as we have seen, seems to take – that contextual factors must be extraneous to the expressive capacities of context-sensitive utterances. An explanation emerges from Burge’s treatment of the “epistemic basis” for his semantic distinction between *de re* and *de dicto*.

He writes (345–6):

The rough epistemic analogue of the linguistic notion of what is expressed by a semantically significant expression is the notion of a concept. Traditionally speaking, concepts are a person’s means of representing objects in thought. For present purposes, we may include as concepts other alleged mental entities that the empiricist tradition did not clearly distinguish from them – for example, perceptions or images – so long as these are viewed as types of representations of objects. From a semantical viewpoint, a *de dicto* belief is a belief in which the believer is related only to a completely expressed proposition (*dictum*). *The epistemic analogue is a belief that is fully conceptualized.* That is, a correct ascription of the *de dicto* belief identifies it purely by reference to a “content” all of whose semantically relevant components characterize elements in the believer’s conceptual repertoire.

Given that conceptual content is made up of *means* of representation in thought, a belief’s being fully conceptualized can mean only that it has a fully propositional content exhausted by some collection of thought symbols; and it would follow that there is no room for contextual factors to contribute to determining how such a belief may be correctly ascribed. This makes Burge’s picture of the relation between conceptual content and context obligatory; and, applied to the linguistic expression of thought, with a plausible equation between conceptual content and what can be completely expressed, it generates Burge’s curious deafness to what Frege seems to be trying to say in the passage that I have quoted.

But Burge makes this look inexorable only by a patent slide; from concepts as parts or aspects of the *content* of a representational state, such as a belief, to concepts as *means* of representation. In the former sense (which is non-Fregean, but for present purposes only harmlessly so), concepts would indeed be analogous to *what is expressed* by words, as Burge says. In the latter sense, they would be analogous to *what does the expressing*: to the words themselves.

Once this conflation is discerned, the direction of argument can reverse: it is not that an independently compulsory division between content and context undermines Frege’s wish to make a different use of the concept of expression, but rather that the evident coherence of Frege’s remarks, with the same

plausible equation between 'conceptual content' and what can be 'completely expressed', shows that Burge's picture of the relation between context and content is unwarranted. There is no more reason to accept that contextual factors are extraneous to the content-determining powers of a conceptual repertoire than there is to accept, in face of Frege, that what is expressed by a context-sensitive utterance cannot be partly determined by the context in which it is made. So for all that Burge shows, a conceptual repertoire can include the ability to think of objects under modes of presentation whose functioning depends essentially on (say) the perceived presence of the objects. Such *de re* modes of presentation would be parts or aspects of content, not vehicles for it; no means of mental representation could determine the content in question by itself, without benefit of context, but that does not establish any good sense in which the content is not fully conceptualized.

It would be illuminating to consider why it is so tempting to conflate mental content with means of representation, but for my purposes here it is enough to point out that it is a conflation. Writers on Frege typically assume without much argument that a Fregean sense, of the sort suitable to be the sense of a singular term, must be available to be expressed whether or not it determines an object.⁹ Burge supplies an explicit argument, whose premisses are, first, the plausible thesis that we can make room for existence-dependence in, say, beliefs only by giving contextual factors an essential role in determining their correct attribution; and, secondly, the separation of content from context. Failing an alternative, it seems fair to suppose that something like Burge's argument lies behind the usual assumption about the possibilities for Fregean theory; indeed something on the lines of Burge's division of content from context is a near orthodoxy in writers on these matters, usually without Burge's self-consciousness about it. But this division of content from context is recommended only by a conflation.¹⁰

5. A *de re* sense would be specific to its *res*; perhaps Frege is simply drawing out the implications of this, as applied to a sort of *de re* sense whose instances present a thinker as himself, when he writes that "everyone is presented to

⁹ There are passages where Frege seems to say this. But given the plausible connection of the concept of *Bedeutung* with the concept of semantic value, the idea of a sense that determines no *Bedeutung* is very difficult: see Evans, pp. 22–8; and the passages can be neutralized by adverting to peculiarities in Frege's use of the notion of fiction: *ibid.* pp. 28–30. Contrary to something implied at p. 197 of Christopher Peacocke, "Demonstrative Thought and Psychological Explanation", *Synthese* 49 (1981), 187–217, Frege's apparent attribution of senses to empty singular terms is quite distinct from his doctrine that senses have only senses, not *Bedeutungen*, as constituents (and much more peripheral to his position).

¹⁰ Evans's rebuttal of Perry's "Frege on Demonstratives" (see "Understanding Demonstratives") turns on the lack of any basis for Perry's assumption that Fregean senses for singular terms must be "descriptive". This complaint is quite correct; but it risks being met with incomprehension as long as the framework which holds the assumption in place is not challenged.

himself in a special and primitive way, in which he is presented to no-one else" (LI, p. 12). Commentators have made heavy weather over two issues about this: first, whether it is consistent with the constant "linguistic meaning" of a context-sensitive expression; and, secondly, whether it is consistent with Frege's doctrine that thoughts are objective.

On the first issue, some philosophers have written as if accommodating the constancy of linguistic meaning would require crediting a context-sensitive expression with a mode of presentation constant across all univocal uses of it (see McGinn, pp. 64–5). Such a mode of presentation would not be a Fregean sense, since it would not determine the appropriate sort of *Bedeutung* except in conjunction with a context. What would serve would be something on the lines of David Kaplan's notion of *character*: characters are functions from contexts to 'Russellian propositions' or their constituents.¹¹

This may seem to yield independent support for Burge's picture of the relation between content and context. But that is an illusion, since constancy of linguistic meaning can be accommodated in terms of *de re* senses. Particular *de re* senses, each specific to its *res*, can be grouped into sorts. Different *de re* senses (modes of presentation) can present their different *res* in the same sort of way: for instance, by exploiting their perceptual presence. And the univocity of a context-sensitive expression can be registered by associating it with a single sort of *de re* sense.¹²

These two ways of accommodating constancy – in terms of character and in terms of sort of *de re* sense – are very different. Given a context, a suitable sub-sentential character will determine an object, or else – if no object is suitably involved in the context – nothing. Even in the latter sort of case, the character is still, according to this way of thinking, available to be expressed: a constituent of a sub-propositional conceptual content. Contrast *de re* senses. Given a context, a sort of *de re* sense may determine a *de re* sense (if one cares to put it like that), or else it too may determine nothing. And in the latter sort of case, according to this way of thinking, there can only be a gap – an absence – at, so to speak, the relevant place in the mind – the place where, given that the sort of *de re* sense in question appears to be instantiated, there appears to be a specific *de re* sense.¹³

¹¹ See Kaplan, "On the Logic of Demonstratives", in *Contemporary Perspectives in the Philosophy of Language*, ed. P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, Jr., and H. K. Wettstein (Minneapolis, 1979), 401–12; cf. the concept of *role* introduced by Perry, p. 479.

¹² See Evans, "Understanding Demonstratives", p. 298. This point removes the motivation for Michael Dummett's idea (IFP, Ch. 6) that indexical expressions force on Frege a distinction (which he fails to draw) between sense as linguistic significance and sense as mode of presentation. A corollary is that there is no need to play down Frege's interest in linguistic meaning in order to defend him: cf. Burge 2, p. 357, and, with more elaboration, Burge 3, pp. 399–407.

¹³ Perhaps there is a thought symbol (a means of representation) at a place corresponding to the gap. But to accept this is not to accept that there is, at that place, an *aspect* or *ingredient* of content. What there is at that place, if this suggestion is accepted, is a putative *bearer* or *vehicle* of content.

It may seem, contrary to what I have just said, that one could capture the effect of a Fregean conception of *de re* thoughts in terms of a special kind of Russellian proposition: Russellian propositions with both *res* and characters as constituents. On this view, an ordered pair of *res* and character might represent a *de re* sense: such an item certainly depends on the *res* for its existence, and it determines, but is not determined by, a *Bedeutung* of the appropriate sort, namely the *res*.¹⁴ However, although this suggestion does thus mimic aspects of a genuinely Fregean position, the resemblance is only superficial. This suggestion secures a *de re* nature for these “thoughts” only by violating Frege’s doctrine that thoughts are senses with senses, not *Bedeutungen*, as constituents. It is another way of making the same point to say that at best this suggestion shows the possibility of grafting a version of the Fregean terminology on to a picture of the *de re* that would be quite congenial to Burge; this can raise at best a verbal question about Burge’s conception of the relation between content and context.¹⁵

6. The second issue is about the consistency of *de re* senses, and in particular Frege’s remarks about the pronoun ‘I’, with the doctrine that thoughts are objective.¹⁶

It is true that Frege sometimes connects the objectivity of thoughts with their being communicable. And it is true that he cannot see how thoughts involving the “special and primitive way” in which each person is presented to himself can figure in communication. What he suggests is that for purposes of communication a person “must use ‘I’ in a sense which can be grasped by others, perhaps in the sense of ‘he who is speaking to you at this moment’ ” (LI, p. 13). In fact this is quite unsatisfactory, as becomes clear if we try to construct a parallel account of the role of ‘I’-thoughts in receiving communication as opposed to issuing it. Suppose someone says to me, “You have mud on your face”. If I am to understand him, I must entertain an ‘I’-thought, thinking something to this effect: “I have mud on my face: that is what he is saying.” Frege’s strategy for keeping the special and primitive way in which I am presented to myself out of communication suggests nothing better than the

¹⁴ See Peacocke, “Demonstrative Thought and Psychological Explanation”, p. 197. At p. 195, Peacocke denies that what he calls “type modes of presentation” are characters, but on the doubtful ground that “character is essentially linguistic”; I cannot see that he says anything that excludes interpreting his “type modes of presentation” as functions from contexts to objects. The fact that such functions are available to be expressed even when they determine no objects makes the ‘type’-‘token’ terminology very odd, but in a way that Peacocke seems not to mind; see his *Sense and Content* (Oxford, 1983), p. 9, n. 6.

¹⁵ See McGinn, p. 68, n. 17. I think McGinn’s point tells against Peacocke (see n. 14 above); and also against Evans’s “notational variant” argument against Perry (“Understanding Demonstratives”, pp. 298–300), which seems to me to be a slip on Evans’s part. It does not apply to the position that I am defending.

¹⁶ For commentators’ worries about this, see especially Perry, and McGinn, Ch. 5.

following: the 'I'-sense involved here is the sense of "he who is being addressed". But this would not do. I can entertain the thought that he who is being addressed has mud on his face, as what is being said, and not understand the remark; I may not know that *I* am he who is being addressed.¹⁷

Frege's troubles about 'I' cannot be blamed simply on the idea of special and primitive senses; they result, rather, from the assumption – which is what denies the special and primitive senses any role in communication – that communication must involve a sharing of thoughts between communicator and audience.¹⁸ That assumption is quite natural, and Frege seems to take it for granted. But there is no obvious reason why he could not have held, instead, that in linguistic interchange of the appropriate kind, mutual understanding – which is what successful communication achieves – requires not shared thoughts but different thoughts which, however, stand and are mutually known to stand in a suitable relation of correspondence. (Notice that the correspondence in question is not the one that Frege recognizes in this passage:

. . . with a proper name, it is a matter of the way the object so designated is presented. This may happen in different ways, and to every such way there corresponds a special sense of a sentence containing the proper name. The different thoughts thus obtained from the same sentences correspond in truth-value, of course; that is to say, if one is true then all are true, and if one is false then all are false. Nevertheless the difference must be recognized. (LI, p. 12)

Here we have thoughts related by mere co-reference in modes of presentation that they contain; whereas in view of the point about "he who is being addressed", that would not suffice for the communication-allowing correspondence that I am envisaging.¹⁹)

When he insists that thoughts are objective, Frege's main purpose is to deny that the being of a thought is dependent on its being entertained (or grasped), as the being of an idea is dependent on its having a bearer. This purpose is in no way obstructed by countenancing *de re* senses for 'I', one for each person. This gives me (for instance) 'I'-thoughts that only I can entertain; but it does not follow that they are not available to be entertained independently of my actually entertaining them. Sustaining the idea that even special and primitive 'I'-thoughts are mind-independent in this sense would perhaps be facilitated by showing that such thoughts can figure in mutual understanding, as I have claimed that Frege could have done. Publicity in any stronger sense is not

¹⁷ This point is made by Evans, p. 314.

¹⁸ For a questioning of the assumption, see Evans, pp. 40, 315–6.

¹⁹ This paragraph suggests the possibility of an alternative to Evans's treatment of certain phenomena of "cognitive dynamics" (a phrase of Kaplan's) in terms of "dynamic thoughts", sketched in § 3 above. I shall not pursue this here.

needed; Frege is led to suggest otherwise by his connecting communication with the sharing of thought, but the connection is not compulsory. The notion of *de re* 'I'-senses need not be in tension with anything that is essential to a Fregean conception of thought.²⁰

7. I have argued that Burge's theoretical framework is not cogently supported; I shall end with two considerations that tell against it.

On a Fregean account of the *de re*, Burge's supposedly unitary distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* would divide into two distinctions, which it would be open to us to regard as largely independent: first, a distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* attributions of, say, belief, marked by whether or not designations of the relevant *res* can be replaced *salva veritate* by other designations of them or by variables bound by initial existential quantifiers; and, secondly, a distinction between *contents* that are *de re*, in the sense that they depend on the existence of the relevant *res*, and contents that are not *de re* in that sense.²¹ A belief with a *de re* content may be attributed in the *de re* way, but need not. And it is not obvious that any belief that is attributable in the *de re* way has a *de re* content.²² In any case, even if *de re* attributability does imply *de re* content, *de re* attributions do not display the logical form of states with *de re* content; on the Fregean view, a *de re* attribution – one in which the relevant *res* is mentioned outside the specification of content – is true, if it is, in virtue of the truth of an attribution involving a "complete" propositional content.²³ (If, as may happen, we cannot place ourselves in a context such as we would need to exploit in order to give "complete expression" to the content, we may retain the capacity for a *de re* attribution, true in virtue of the truth of a *de dicto* attribution whose expression is beyond us.)

²⁰ These considerations undermine the motivation for Peacocke's insistence ("Demonstrative Thought and Psychological Explanation", pp. 191–3) that we must everywhere distinguish between expressing ("exploiting") modes of presentation and referring to them. Certainly a Fregean view has senses referred to by words in content-specifying 'that'-clauses; but the best construal of Fregean theory has them expressed there as well. This fits Dummett's dissolution (FPL, Ch. 9) of the supposed problem of an infinite hierarchy of oblique senses. Peacocke mentions Dummett's discussion approvingly, but makes an exception for demonstrative modes of presentation. But there is no need for the exception. (Of course not just any mention of a mode of presentation will count as expressing it.)

²¹ '*De dicto*' is clearly inappropriate to mark this contrast.

²² Uncontaminated by philosophy, we are quite casual about "exportation" in cases of the "shortest spy" sort. (For the terminology here, see W. V. Quine, "Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes", *Journal of Philosophy*, 53 (1956), 177–87; and David Kaplan, "Quantifying In", in *Words and Objections*, ed. D. Davidson and J. Hintikka (Dordrecht, 1969), 206–42. Burge's insistence (Burge 2, p. 346) that the logical form is different in such cases (involving a complete *dictum*, unlike canonical cases of *de re* attribution) seems strained; his excellent motivation for this claim (to preserve a robust conception of *de re* propositional attitudes) can be gratified in a different way.

²³ "True in virtue of" rather than – as suggested by, e.g., Kaplan, "Quantifying In" – "analysable in terms of". I doubt whether there is much system in our practice with *de re* attributions. (See n. 22 above.)

Now consider the logical form of a *de re* attribution of, say, a belief. Roughly speaking, it is a relational expression with argument-places occupied by designations of the believer, the *res*, and a propositional fragment.²⁴ How does the relational expression relate the *res* to the propositional fragment?²⁵ In the state of affairs that the attribution represents, the propositional fragment should figure as somehow tied to the *res* by a predicational tie; can this intuitive requirement be met? If, as in the Fregean position, the *de re* attribution is conceived as true in virtue of the truth of a *de dicto* attribution, this question holds no terrors: in the underlying *de dicto* attribution, the required predicational tie will be explicitly expressed. But if, as in Burge's framework, the *de re* attribution is conceived as "barely true",²⁶ the belief relation has to secure the presence of the predicational tie all on its own; and it is quite unclear that it can be explained so as to carry the weight. This difficulty for any position like Burge's is due to Russell (following Wittgenstein);²⁷ so far as I know it has never been dealt with by adherents of this sort of position.

8. The second consideration is that Burge's framework forces us to choose between a pair of positions each of which is compellingly motivated by the deficiencies of the other.

With the framework in place, the only Fregean treatment of context-sensitive singular terms is to credit particular uses of them with senses that determine objects in such a way that the senses are expressible whether the objects exist or not. At best this generates a falsification of, for instance, demonstrative thought, akin to the falsification of perceptual experience that is induced by representative realism. Representative realism postulates items that are "before the mind" in experience whether objects are perceived or not, with the effect that even when an object is perceived, it is conceived as "present to the mind" only by proxy. Analogously, if an object thought of demonstratively is present to the mind only by way of something which could have been deployed in thought even if the object had not existed, the object is before the mind only by

²⁴ We can ignore such niceties as that the second argument should really be a sequence (so that we can vary the number of *res* without needing new relations). We can also ignore divergences over the nature and internal structure of the propositional fragment.

²⁵ Having fixed the logical form, we go on to look for elucidation of the semantical primitive: see Donald Davidson, "Truth and Meaning", *Synthese*, 17 (1967), 304–33.

²⁶ See Dummett, "What is a Theory of Meaning? (II)", in *Truth and Meaning*, ed. G. Evans and J. McDowell (Oxford, 1976), 67–137, p. 89.

²⁷ For Russell's exposition, see *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, pp. 81–3. If we understood how a Russellian proposition could be a kind of proposition, we would certainly have no problems in saying what it was for one of them to be true; but the point that Russell takes from Wittgenstein is that a precondition for so much as supposing that we are dealing with a bearer of truth-value is not satisfied. (That is not how Russell puts it.)

proxy.²⁸ Without some seemingly inescapable compulsion, it is hard to believe that anyone would tolerate this indirectness in an account of how demonstrative thinking relates us to objects.

The felt compulsion comes from a perception of how genuinely unattractive is the only alternative that the framework allows.²⁹ Consider, for instance, how strange it is to suggest that what a belief is about can be partly determined by something that is “not part of the cognitive world of the believer” (Burge 2 p. 359) – by something “external to what cognitively transpires in the mind of the thinker” (McGinn, p. 68). The resistance that this suggestion naturally elicits cannot be disarmed by introducing a use of ‘mind’ according to which a *de re* “content”, jointly determined by aspects of a thinker’s “cognitive world” and by matters external to it, can count as “in the mind”.³⁰ Once the subject’s cognitive world has been segregated from his involvement with real objects,³¹ this merely terminological move cannot restore genuine sense to the idea that we can get our minds around what we believe – even when the belief is *de re*.³² Here again, it seems implausible that anyone could fail to see how unattractive

²⁸ This description fits the theory of indexically expressible thought expounded by Searle, *Intentionality*, pp. 218–30; note Searle’s insistence that such thoughts could be entertained by a brain in a vat. On Searle’s account, the object of a perceptually demonstrative thought is specified in terms of a causal relation to a current perceptual experience; *qua* object of thought, the object is present to the mind only by proxy, and this virtually necessitates a construal of the “current perceptual experience” on representative lines (spoiling the insight that Searle expresses at p. 46 by saying that perceptual experiences are presentations rather than representations). Burge mentions a connection between rejection of his view of the *de re* and representative realism – Burge 2, p. 350, n. 12 – but he does not elaborate; this may be partly because he does not consider a position like Searle’s at all. Certainly his objection of obscurantism (p. 353; cf. Burge 3, pp. 427–30) seems not to apply to Searle: it fits a mere postulation of Fregean senses, not the highly detailed specifications that Searle offers.

²⁹ This motivation is very clear in Searle, *Intentionality*.

³⁰ See McGinn, “The Structure of Content”, in *Thought and Object* (n. 5 above), 207–58 (see especially p. 257, n. 31).

³¹ It is worth noting how bizarre the segregation makes this use of ‘cognitive’.

³² There is supposed to be an argument from the nature of explanations of behaviour for separating off this supposed aspect of the mental (whatever one calls it); but this is well answered by Evans, pp. 203–4. Dissatisfaction with the terminological move is not alleviated, but if anything reinforced, when one notes how adherents of this bipartite conception of mind typically single out the supposed cognitive aspect of the mental by means of distorted forms of features that are intuitively attributable to the mental as such. I shall mention two examples: first, interiority, which in fact fits the mental as such (*de re* beliefs are internal in the appropriate sense, which is a metaphorical one), but which is literalized (“in the head”) and used to characterize the supposed cognitive aspect of the mental; and, secondly, availability to introspection, which is oddly glossed in this position as requiring infallibility (see McGinn, “The Structure of Content”, pp. 253–5) – whereas in the only good sense we can give to the notion of introspection, *de re* beliefs are (fallibly, of course) available to it. Simon Blackburn’s phenomenological argument for a version of the position I am attacking (see *Spreading the Word* (Oxford, 1984), Ch. 9) is answerable by an application of the ideas outlined in my “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge”, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 68 (1982), 455–79; to put the point another way, it involves a misuse of the relation between appearance and reality entirely analogous to that which vitiates the Argument from Illusion.

this position is, except under a felt compulsion to suppose that this must be how things are; and a felt compulsion towards that conclusion can derive in turn from the deficiencies of the supposedly unique alternative.

This sort of oscillation, which is familiar in philosophy, should lead one to look for a suspect common assumption. Countenancing *de re* Fregean senses gratifies both the natural motivations that Burge's framework represents as incompatible: it yields thoughts which are both *de re* and part of the thinker's cognitive world. The justification for the framework is quite unconvincing, as I have pointed out. A combination of strongly held belief and unconvincing argument often betrays something philosophically deep; I believe that reflecting on the possibilities for a Fregean account of the *de re* is an excellent way to undermine pervasive and damaging prejudices in the philosophy of mind.³³

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³³ A useful label is 'psychologism'. In "The Basis of Reference", *Erkenntnis* 13 (1978), 171–206, Stephen Schiffer tries to rebut the charge that occupation of the first horn of this supposed dilemma is psychologistic. The attempt leaves me unconvinced; but it may somewhat allay Schiffer's sense of injustice to make it clear that I think the charge applies to occupation of the other horn too: it is psychologism, in the end, that makes the dilemma seem inescapable.