

Being at the Centre: Self-location in Thought and Language

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Self-locating attitudes and assertions provide a challenge to the received view of mental and linguistic intentionality. In this paper I try to show that the best way to meet this challenge is to adopt relativistic, centred possible worlds accounts for both belief and communication. First, I argue that self-locating beliefs support a centred account of belief. Second, I argue that self-locating utterances support a complementary centred account of communication. Together, these two claims motivate a unified centred conception of belief and communication.

1 Introduction

What are the objects of belief, what are the objects of assertion, and how do the two interact in communication? Consider my belief that *I have Torsonic Polarity Syndrome*. What is its content? Do I express the same content when I utter the sentence “I have Torsonic Polarity Syndrome”? What do you, the hearer, learn from the assertion? Here’s the standard picture: the things we believe are also the things we assert, so-called ‘propositions’; propositions have absolute truth-values, i.e. they are equally true or false for everyone, throughout eternity, and at all places (though they are allowed to vary from possible world to possible world); in communication, the speaker transmits a proposition she believes to the hearer by performing an utterance that expresses it.

The picture has three central elements: 1. *Monism*, 2. *Absolutism*, and 3. *Transmission*. Roughly, *Monism* is the claim that the objects of beliefs and utterances are the same type of entity, propositions; *Absolutism* states that the truth-values of propositions are constant within the same possible world; and *Transmission* has it that successful communication consists in the transmission of a proposition from speaker to hearer. As simple and neat as the standard view may be, it faces a serious obstacle: it has difficulties accounting for self-locating thoughts and utterances. I argue that we should abandon

Absolutism and adopt relativistic accounts of belief and communication instead. That allows us to maintain Monism, at the price of Transmission.

According to the received view, propositions play a number of different theoretical roles. In addition to their roles as contents of attitudes and assertions, they are taken to be the semantic values of sentences, the referents of that-clauses, the nodes of logical relations, and bearers of truth and modal properties (King, 2003, 2007, 2014; McGrath, 2012; Cappelen and Hawthorne, 2009; Schaffer, 2012; Soames, 2012). Call the claim that all of these roles have a unique realiser *Monism_{prop}*. Here, we are primarily interested in the narrower question of whether the contents of beliefs and assertions are of the same type:

Monism_{att-ass}

There is one type of entity that is both the content of attitudes and the content of assertions.¹

To allow for the potential falsity of Monism, i.e. for the possibility that different propositional roles have different realisers, we should also give more specific formulations of Absolutism. The following two are relevant here:

Absolutism_{att}

The content of attitudes varies in truth-value at most from possible world to possible world.

Absolutism_{ass}

The content of assertions varies in truth-value at most from possible world to possible world.

Correspondingly, there are two relevant versions of Relativism:²

Relativism_{att}

The content of some attitudes varies in truth-value relative to non-worldly parameters, such as times, places, or individuals.

Relativism_{ass}

The content of some assertions varies in truth-value relative to non-worldly parameters, such as times, places, or individuals.

¹ This claim is somewhat imprecise. On the intended interpretation sets of possible worlds (absolute contents) and sets of centered possible worlds (relativistic contents) count as different *types* of entities.

² This use of “Relativism” corresponds to that of Kölbel (2008). Relativism thus understood is not committed to the claim that propositional truth is relative to *contexts of assessment* (MacFarlane, 2014) and covers forms of *nonindexical contextualism* (MacFarlane, 2009).

An attractive feature of combining Monism and Absolutism is the promise of a compellingly simple and intuitive model of communication. In a nutshell, it looks like this: the speaker believes a certain proposition which she wants to share with the hearer; she can do so by performing an utterance that expresses it; the hearer, if she understands the utterance and trusts the speaker, will come to believe that same proposition herself; there is an identity in content between the speaker’s belief, the utterance, and the resulting belief of the hearer.³ We can capture this view of communication with the following claim:

Transmission

Successful communication is the transmission of the content of one of the speaker’s beliefs to the hearer via an utterance which expresses it.

In this paper I argue that Relativism offers the best account of self-location. My starting point is the assumption that “belief content” and “utterance content” are theoretical terms which are implicitly defined by their role in our theories of belief and communication, respectively. Relativistic contents, so the central claim, can play the corresponding theoretical roles better than absolute contents. First, I present an argument for Relativism_{att}, based on the cognitive significance of self-locating beliefs. Relativism about belief content provides initial support for Relativism about utterance content, as there is a *prima facie* case for Monism_{att-ass}. But the support is fairly weak. To bolster the case, I present an independent argument for Relativism_{ass}, based on the content of self-locating utterances. We end up with a unified relativistic picture of belief and assertion. While endorsing Relativism for both attitude and utterance content enables us to uphold Monism_{att-ass}, it forces us to abandon the transmission model of communication. But the Relativist has an alternative: the Recentring model.

2 Against Attitudinal Absolutism

2.1 Belief content and theoretical roles

Do belief contents have absolute or relative truth-values? It’s important to note that this is not the question of whether beliefs, or belief states (i.e. the doxastic states of individuals at times), have absolute or relative truth-values. A Relativist about belief *content* can and should endorse an absolute notion of truth for belief *states*: *Belief state B is true iff the truth-value of B’s content is the True at the time/place/subject/world of*

³ I’ve labelled this model of communication the “FedEx model” (Weber, 2013a); this name goes back to “package delivery model” (Moss, 2012). Others have called it the “belief transfer model” (Egan, 2007; Torre, 2010), the “Lockean model” (Gauker, 2003), or the “classical view” (Pagin, 2008). The above is a somewhat idealised sketch; e.g. in real life cases, the hearer doesn’t necessarily have to endorse the utterance content. These finer points won’t matter here.

*B.*⁴ Here, the truth predicate for belief states on the left hand side isn't relativised to any parameters; still, the definition allows that belief contents yield different truth-values for different individuals, times, or places.

There are three major paradigms aiming to account for belief. In order to keep the discussion manageable, I will focus mainly on these three candidates.

1. Standard Absolutism_{att} (Stalnaker, 1981, 1984).
2. Guises Absolutism_{att} (Perry, 1979; Salmon, 1990; Braun, 2002).
3. Centred Relativism_{att} (Lewis, 1979, 1986).

According to Standard Absolutism_{att}, beliefs are binary relations between subjects and sets of possible worlds or corresponding structured entities.⁵ Guises Absolutists_{att} think that a comprehensive account of belief has to introduce a third relatum, so-called *belief states* (Perry, 1979) or *propositional guises* (Braun, 2002). On both theories, belief contents don't change in truth-value within a world. Like Standard Absolutism_{att}, Centred Relativism_{att} is binary. But it identifies belief contents with sets of *centred* possible worlds, i.e. individual, time, world triples (Lewis, 1979). Such centred contents can vary in truth-value between different subjects or times in the same world.

How should we adjudicate between these rival conceptions of belief content? Here's a good policy: in order to say what a belief content *is*, we may first ask what a belief content *does* and then find something that does that.⁶ In general, if you want to know what the nature of *x* is, first specify *x*'s *theoretical role*, and then look for the *realiser* of this role. We can distinguish two central theoretical roles for belief content:

1. Belief contents explain and rationalise behaviour (together with the contents of desires).
2. Belief contents capture the cognitive significance of beliefs.

The first role gives the rationale behind postulating content for beliefs in the first place. Belief contents are theoretical entities that earn their keep by playing a crucial part within a systematic account of human behaviour. This picture of belief underlies e.g. the *pragmatic theory* of attitudes of Stalnaker (1984). It naturally meshes with a functionalist account of belief, according to which beliefs are individuated by the typical

⁴ This clause mirrors the definition of utterance truth from Kaplan (1989, Section XIII).

⁵ Stalnaker's recent account of self-location has important similarities with Perry's framework (Stalnaker, 1999b, 2008, 2011, 2015); it is unclear whether it still qualifies as a version of Standard Absolutism_{att}.

⁶ This is a variation on a slogan by Lewis. The original quote goes: "In order to say what a meaning *is*, we may first ask what a meaning *does* and then find something that does that." (Lewis, 1970a, p. 20); for the underlying methodology see Lewis (1970b, 1972).

ways in which they come about, interact with other attitudes, and *cause behaviour*. The second role is equally fundamental. There are different ways of classifying cognitive states. For instance, we can classify them with regards to the complexity of their vehicles. Classifying beliefs in terms of *content* is to group together beliefs that represent things in the same way. Capturing cognitive significance is one of the defining tasks of belief content thus understood. The functionalist approach provides a natural explanation of how the two roles connect: cognitive differences correspond to differences in associated functional roles, i.e. we expect that they can in principle be revealed in the way beliefs are produced, interact with other attitudes, or cause behaviour.

There may be additional theoretical tasks for belief content which are also of some interest, e.g. accounting for our everyday judgments about same-believing (see §4.1). Ultimately, the best attitude may be to endorse a tolerant Pluralism about content: there are different notions of *content* serving different explanatory purposes (Lewis, 1986; Perry, 2001; Chalmers, 2006). Still, the abovementioned roles seem particularly central and the corresponding notion of content sufficiently widespread to deserve the status assigned here. An initial concern may be that the proposed understanding of “belief content” seems to exclude the Guises Absolutist_{att} from the start, since she uses that term in a different way.⁷ Partially, this is a verbal matter. Everybody is free to use the term “belief content” as they choose. As long as we keep the different notions apart, no harm will result (to repeat, I here use it synonymous with “the realiser of the theoretical roles of explaining behavior and capturing cognitive significance”). The interesting, non-verbal question we’re trying to answer is what kind of entities do in fact realise the mentioned theoretical roles. We’re not excluding Guises Absolutism_{att}, we’re assessing it on the basis of the answer it gives to this question.

2.2 The argument from self-locating beliefs

The following argument against Absolutism_{att} focuses on the second role for belief content; in particular, it invokes the cognitive significance of self-locating beliefs.⁸ Indi-

⁷ I discuss this concern further in §2.3.

⁸ It is difficult to give a framework independent characterisation of the class of *self-locating* beliefs. Typically, they are described as beliefs whose expression or ascription involves indexical expressions. This is unsatisfying. Many beliefs are self-locating even though their ascription/expression doesn’t mention any (overtly) indexical elements, e.g. the belief that *the enemy is approaching*. And belief ascriptions that contain indexicals don’t necessarily ascribe self-locating beliefs, e.g. ‘Aren believes that she is the chancellor of Germany’ might report an objective belief. A Centred Relativist_{att} can delineate the relevant class as the beliefs whose content distinguishes between different centres within a world. Note that, using the popular concept parlance, they are not restricted to beliefs which employ a special *ego* or *nunc* concept.

A precursor of the following argument occurs in (Weber, 2014). It is inspired by an objection of Stalnaker (1981, 2006) to Perry’s Guises Absolutism_{att}. In its present form, it also targets Standard Absolutism_{att}.

viduals with different self-locating beliefs differ in their cognitive perspectives. These differences should be captured by an adequate account of belief. However, Absolutism_{att} assigns identical contents to some such beliefs. Therefore, Absolutism_{att} should be given up in favour of Relativism_{att}.

1. *Self-Location*: Different self-locating beliefs differ in cognitive significance.
2. *Content Difference*: Beliefs that differ in cognitive significance differ in content.
3. *Content Identity*: Absolutism_{att} assigns the same content to some distinct self-locating beliefs.
4. *Conclusion*: Absolutism_{att} is flawed.

Each premise seems plausible. *Self-Location* is intuitively compelling. Consider Aren and Ani. Aren believes that he himself is in Perth and that Ani is in Berlin, while Ani thinks that she herself is in Berlin and that Aren is in Perth. It seems plausible that their different self-locating beliefs correspond to differences in their conceptions of how things stand. According to the way Aren represents things, his own location is Perth. In contrast, according to the way Ani take things to be, her present position is in Berlin. Moreover, these representational differences are manifested in different behavioural dispositions. If both wanted to be in Berlin, Aren would be disposed to buy a plane ticket, while Ani would be disposed to stay put. Importantly, the main proponents of Standard and Guises Absolutism_{att} endorse *Self-Location* as well. Stalnaker writes:

[...] differences in perspective—in where the agents locate themselves in the world as they take it to be—[...] seem to be *cognitive* differences [...]
(Stalnaker, 2006, p. 286), see also (Stalnaker, 1981, p. 148)

Likewise, Perry (1977, 1979) accepts this premise. As a Guises Absolutist_{att}, he will locate some of the cognitive differences in differences in associated guises, rather than content.

Content Difference is even harder to reject. It is simply part of the concept of *belief content* as introduced that it aims to capture differences in cognitive significance. (It is of course possible to question the initial background assumptions concerning the meaning of theoretical terms and the centrality of the above theoretical roles. Here, I'm largely taking these for granted.)

That leaves *Content Identity*. We can see that this premise holds by reflecting on a variation of the two gods case from Lewis (1979). In Lewis's story, there are two gods who are objectively omniscient, but don't know which mountain they live on. While Lewis's case is controversial, the proposed variation side-steps the central point of contention. There is a persistent dispute over how to model the gods' ignorance. Standard Absolutists_{att} might follow Stalnaker (1981, 2008) and represent it in terms of haecceitistic differences between worlds. Proponents of Guises Relativism_{att} might

explain it as ignorance of an objective proposition under a special self-locating guise. In contrast, let's consider the gods once they are omniscient *simpliciter*, i.e. when they know which mountain they are on. The issue of how to model their ignorance doesn't concern us. The Absolutist_{att} seems bound to claim that when the gods have resolved their indexical ignorance, they are related to the same content. As both gods can exclude all other possible worlds, the content of their respective belief systems comprises merely the singleton of their actual world $\{w_{\text{gods}}\}$.⁹ Nonetheless, their cognitive perspectives are rather different: one locates himself on the tallest, the other on the coldest mountain. The Absolutist_{att}'s conception of content doesn't reflect these cognitive differences, i.e. *Content Identity* is true.

In order to use the argument as support for Relativism_{att}, we have to show that it can do better. This is rather straightforward. According to Centred Relativism_{att}, contents are sets of centred worlds. The omniscient gods are related to different sets of centred worlds. The god on the tallest mountain believes the singleton of the centred world with himself at the centre: $\{\langle \text{god}_{\text{TM}}, t_n, w_{\text{gods}} \rangle\}$; the god on the coldest mountain, on the other hand, is related to a content centred on himself: $\{\langle \text{god}_{\text{CM}}, t_n, w_{\text{gods}} \rangle\}$. As desired, the different self-locating beliefs are assigned different contents. Since centred content is better suited to fulfil belief content's central theoretical role, Centred Relativism_{att} is preferable to Absolutism_{att}.¹⁰ Like most arguments in philosophy, this is not a knock-down argument. We will now look at potential reactions from Absolutists_{att}.

2.3 Replies

A Guises Absolutist_{att} like Perry might offer the following reply: 'True, we cannot capture cognitive significance purely in terms of what I call "content". The entities which do model cognitive significance in my framework, i.e. what you call "content", are pairs of the form $\langle \text{guise}, \text{proposition} \rangle$ (or just guises). Your argument doesn't show that there is something wrong with my theory, but merely that our use of "content" isn't the same.' Fair enough—we shouldn't fight over words. The crucial question is what does

⁹ We can put the point in terms of structured propositions as well: as both are omniscient *simpliciter*, both are equally belief-related to *all* true propositions.

¹⁰ An opponent may raise the following discomfoting question: 'Doesn't Centred Relativism_{att} face a very similar objection? As an *unstructured* account of content, it identifies the contents of cognitively distinct, but logically equivalent beliefs.' Firstly, granting the point, we may take the argument to support structured Relativism_{att} à la Chalmers (2011). Secondly, my own view is that the problem of logical omniscience and that of self-location aren't analogous. Introducing centred content solves the problem of self-location, whereas introducing structured content doesn't ultimately offer a satisfying solution to the problem of logical omniscience—it merely serves to scale it down. There seem to be co-intensional and co-structural beliefs which nevertheless differ in cognitive significance. Moreover, even the structuralist needs to account for the distinction between available, standing beliefs and ones which are unavailable, merely implied by what is believed (Stalnaker, 1991). We all have to live with the problem of logical omniscience (at least for the time being), but not with the problem of self-location. Of course, these points require much more substantiation than I can offer here.

the job in question. According to the above response, it is done by guise-proposition pairs (or just guises). The cognitive differences between the gods are modeled by distinct pairs of this form. Still, the conclusion of the argument stands: Absolutism_{att} is untenable. Contents thus understood don't have absolute truth values. According to Perry (1979), the guise/proposition distinction for beliefs parallels that between *character* and *content* (Kaplan, 1989). Characters are functions from contexts and circumstances of evaluations to truth-values. Importantly, they (often) have variable truth values—characters (often) assign different truth-values to different contexts in the same world. Belief contents, understood as guise-propositions pairs (or simply guises) are therefore not absolute. True, we can, using this conception of belief content, assign absolute truth-values to belief *states*. But as mentioned before, the distinction between Relativism_{att} and Absolutism_{att} concerns whether belief *contents* are absolute or relativistic. Accordingly, we can call this account of belief “Guises Relativism_{att}”. Guises Relativism_{att} isn't a departure from Perry's proposal; it merely acknowledges that the entities playing the role of belief content are relativistic.

The Relativist_{att} now has two options: Centred and Guises Relativism_{att}. Which one is preferable? There is reason to opt for Centred Relativism_{att}. First, it is simpler.¹¹ Second, Centred Relativism_{att} better meshes with our best developed, formal theory of belief: Bayesianism (Chalmers, 2011; Egan, MS). It is not out of the question that we might devise a version of Bayesianism that assigns credences to guise-proposition pairs. But there would be a serious downside (Chalmers, 2011): the Guises Relativist_{att} has to forgo the theoretical benefits of the set-theoretic apparatus of which the Centred Relativist_{att} can avail herself—just like sets of ordinary, possible worlds propositions, sets of centred propositions form a sigma algebra over which to assign a probability distribution. A better option for the Guises Relativist_{att} is to assign credences to the *diagonals* of guises/characters.¹² She could then quite generally identify the objects of beliefs with diagonal contents. On a natural understanding, diagonal contents are sets of centred possible worlds. Guises Relativism_{att} so conceived is equivalent to Centred Relativism_{att}.

How might a Standard Absolutist_{att} respond? She could try to deny *Self-location*. According to this suggestion, the omniscient gods' belief systems have the same cognitive significance. *Prima facie*, this response is implausible. As Stalnaker put it, perspectival differences seem to be cognitive differences. However, the notion of *cognitive significance* is itself somewhat technical, so there may be some room for maneuver here. There seems to be a better option: rejecting *Content Identity*. I have argued elsewhere (Weber, 2014) that Absolutists_{att} who try to account for self-location are driven towards *Indexical*

¹¹ The additional complexity of Guises Relativism_{att} might turn out to be advantageous in accounting for other theoretical roles of belief content.

¹² Characters are typically represented as two-dimensional matrices. The *diagonal* of such a matrix is the set of cells for which context of utterance and circumstance of evaluation coincide.

Russellianism. Indexical Russellianism has three central commitments.

1. Self-locating beliefs are relations between a subject and *singular* propositions about the subject (or the present time).
2. Self-locating beliefs are the *only* singular beliefs we have; all other beliefs are purely qualitative.
3. For every subject S and every time t: S is certain that she is S and the present time is t.

Instead of rejecting *Self-location*, the Russellian can deny *Content Identity*. On her analysis, the gods are related to different singular contents. That is a reflection of the general fact that no two subjects with self-locating beliefs are related to the same content (e.g. only god_{CM} himself can entertain singular propositions about god_{CM}).¹³ Not even a god can be omniscient in the sense of knowing *every* true proposition. Hence, the gods' omniscience rightly understood doesn't entail that they are related to the same content. And this assumption was crucial in establishing *Content Identity*.

Like diagonal Guises Relativism_{att}, Indexical Russellianism is at bottom very similar to Centred Relativism_{att} (Schwarz, 2014). In a sense, the thinker and the present moment play the role of the *centre* in the Russellian framework.¹⁴ On the Lewisian account, to have the self-locating belief *I am such-and-such* is to rule out centred worlds where the centre isn't such-and-such. (Typically, S's doxastic alternatives will include centred worlds with individuals other than S at the centre.) According to the Russellian, for S to have this belief is to rule out worlds where S isn't such-and-such. Since S is certain that she's S, there is never a question about which individual counts as "the centre" in a given belief world. When the Lewisian models S's belief state with two centres within a world, the Russellian employs two qualitatively identical worlds which differ in S's location (and *vice versa*). There is a one-to-one correspondence between the Russellian and the centred representation of doxastic states. Some may think that, in spite of this equivalence, Indexical Russellianism is superior, because it preserves Absolutism_{att}. Whether this is a virtue depends on the case for Absolutism_{att}. I will argue in §4 that it is pretty weak. Moreover, the main support for Absolutism_{att}—Transmission—doesn't support Indexical Russellianism, as it too is inconsistent with the transmission model of communication. There seems to be no good reason to choose Indexical Russellianism over Centred Relativism_{att}. On the other hand, it is unclear whether Indexical Russellianism can handle all additional arguments against Absolutism_{att} mentioned in the next section. Furthermore, the Centred Relativist already has an alternative to the

¹³ Indexical Russellianism is similar to the account of 1st personal thoughts ascribed to Frege (1918), in that the content of 1st personal thoughts is private.

¹⁴ In the following, I will omit reference to times.

Transmission model, while there is as yet no Russellian alternative.¹⁵ Others have criticised the Russellian for her metaphysical commitments, in particular her endorsement of haecceitism (Feit, 2008; Torre, 2010). Hence, there seem to be grounds for preferring Centred Relativism over Indexical Russellianism.

2.4 Other arguments

There are further arguments from self-locating attitudes for Relativism_{att}.¹⁶ 1. We have already mentioned the story of the two gods from Lewis (1979); Chalmers (2011) presents a very similar example. It is possible to be omniscient with respect to objective/absolute propositions, without being omniscient *simpliciter*; hence, there are subjective/relativistic contents that explain the residual ignorance. 2. In addition, Lewis (1979) gives an argument from self-location and belief internalism: if A has the self-locating belief *I am A*, then A's duplicate and world-mate B also has this belief; the content of A's belief is true, while that of B is false; therefore, some contents vary in truth-value within the same world. 3. Perry's (1977, 1979) influential arguments focus on content's role of explaining and rationalising behavior. A and B may share all beliefs and desires with objective/absolute contents, but still differ in their behavioral dispositions; Absolutism_{att} has difficulties explaining these dispositional differences. 4. A straightforward way of locating the realiser of the content role is to consult our most elaborate theory of belief, i.e. Bayesianism. Assigning credences to sets of centred possible worlds seems to be the standard Bayesian approach to self-location (Elga, 2000; Hájek, 2011; Chalmers, 2011; Egan, MS); similar points apply to formal theories of decision making (Egan, MS).¹⁷ 5. Absolutism_{att} has severe problems accounting for *intra-world ignorance* (Weber, 2014). You suffer from intra-world ignorance, if some of your belief worlds contain several individuals that match your self-conception. This is the case for most of us, since we assign non-zero credence to certain duplication scenarios, such as symmetrical universes, universes with eternal recurrence, Everettian quantum worlds, etc.

Even if we don't accept every single one of these arguments, in combination they point fairly clearly towards Relativism_{att}. Next, I want to take a closer look at Centred Relativism_{att}.

¹⁵ In (Weber, 2014), I've sketched the general form a Russellian model of communication might take. According to that proposal, the Russellian model of communication mirrors the centred account: when A utters "I am F" she expresses a singular proposition about herself, i.e. that *A is F*; the hearer B, on the other hand, acquires a different singular proposition about herself: *the person talking to B is F*.

¹⁶ The following isn't intended as a comprehensive list.

¹⁷ Titelbaum (2013) suggests that Bayesians might remain agnostic about content by assigning credences to sentences instead.

3 Centred Belief

Centred Relativism_{att} is often met with skepticism about its intelligibility. For instance, King writes:

[...] it is hard to make sense of the idea that the things I believe may change truth-value across time and location. What would it be e.g. to believe that the sun is shining, where what I believe is something that varies in truth-value across times and locations in the actual world? (King, 2003, p. 196)

Similarly, Soames claims:

Unfortunately, we are given no explanation of how a property [i.e. a centred content] like *being one who is making a mess* can truly or falsely represent anything as being one way or another. (Soames, 2012)

The best way to counter the general charge of unintelligibility, it seems to me, is to spell out the centred conception of belief more explicitly.¹⁸

Centred Relativism_{att} is a modal account of attitudes. It describes belief in terms of a set of *doxastic alternatives*, i.e. the possibilities in which a belief is true. It is therefore helpful to contrast it with the standard modal account. As we will see, the two are very similar. On the standard account, S's belief system represents that p iff p holds in all of S's doxastic alternatives. Formally, this can be represented in a pointed Kripke-model: $M = \langle W, R_S, I, w_S \rangle$. W is a set of possible worlds, R_S is a binary accessibility relation between worlds, I an interpretation function that assigns sets of worlds to formulas, and w_S is a designated point (the actual world of S). R_S determines a set of worlds accessible from w_S , i.e. S's doxastic alternatives. S's doxastic state represents that p iff p is true in all of S's doxastic alternatives.

Belief_{modal}

S's belief system represents that p iff p is true at all possible worlds w' such that $Rw_S w'$.

The framework contains two important theoretical primitives: the accessibility relation R_S and the set of possible worlds W . In itself, it doesn't presuppose a specific interpretation of "possible world". In principle, a possible world might be anything whatsoever. It is standardly assumed that they are what philosophers typically mean by that term:

¹⁸ There may be a more specific worry behind King's remarks. The concern may be that Relativism about belief content entails Relativism about *belief states*. This would indeed be problematic: we might then criticise yesterday's belief that the sun is shining as inappropriate from today's rainy perspective (Evans, 1985). But we have already seen in §2.1 that there is no such entailment; a Relativist_{att} can consistently accept an absolute notion of truth for belief states. Note also that Absolutists_{att} like King cannot claim that there is a general problem with truth relativity, since they accept that there is variability across possible worlds.

maximally specific ways the world might be. S’s doxastic alternatives are maximally specific ways the world might be that are compatible with what she believes. (Obviously, this isn’t a reductive explanation of “doxastic alternative”.)

We can understand the modification introduced by Centred Relativism_{att} as changing the interpretation of “possible world”. We no longer think of them as maximally specific ways for the world to be, but as *maximally specific ways for an object to be*. A way for an object to be is a property. A maximally specific way for an object to be is a maximally specific property. A maximally specific way for an object to be at a time can be identified with a *centred possible world*. On Lewis’s conception, centred worlds are equivalent to *possible individuals*, i.e. world-bound time slices of objects.¹⁹ Lewis (1979) has shown that the centred conception is a generalisation of the standard one: it covers self-locating and objective beliefs alike.

Doxastic alternatives can now be identified with Lewisian possibilities. Accordingly, R_S represents an accessibility relation between possible individuals, and the point w_S corresponds to S’s present, actual time slice. Propositions are sets of possible individuals; a proposition is true at an individual iff the individual is a member of the set. A possible individual counts as one of S’s doxastic alternatives iff the way that individual is is such that S believes she herself might be that way. We can in principle hold on to our original characterisation of belief, $Belief_{modal}$, and reinterpret the relevant terms accordingly. ‘Representing that p’ now also receives a new reading. We can, quite generally, understand representation in terms of locating actuality within a space of possibilities. On the standard conception, to represent that p is to locate the *actual world* amongst the *p-worlds*. On the centred conception, to represent that p is to locate the *actual individual* (i.e. oneself) amongst the *p-individuals*. It is to *self-locate* in a region of the space of possible individuals, or to “self-ascribe a property” (Lewis, 1979).²⁰ For instance, for S to represent that she has Torsonic Polarity Syndrome is for her to locate amongst the individuals with Torsonic Polarity Syndrome. Following this terminology, we can put things thus:

Belief_{self}

S self-ascribes a property p iff all possible individuals i’ such that RSi' instantiate p.

¹⁹ A promising strategy for the Centred Relativist_{att} is to follow Schwarz (2014, §2) and treat the notion of a *maximally specific property*, or *centred possible world*, as fundamental, and define the notion of *possible world* from it.

There may be reasons to opt for centred possible worlds over Lewisian individuals (Chalmers, 2011). We may need to augment centred worlds by an experience co-ordinate to deal with “two-tubes cases” (Austin, 1990).

²⁰ On Lewis’ conception, properties are sets of possible individuals, and property instantiation is set-membership.

What facts ground this talk of “representing that p” or “self-ascription of properties”? Centred Relativism_{att} as such is not committed to a specific metaphysics of belief; it can be agnostic about the ontological nature of doxastic states. Above, I have expressed sympathies for functionalist accounts, according to which beliefs are internal states of individuals that play the right functional roles.

Centred Relativism_{att} is often accused of treating the notion of *self-ascription of properties* as primitive (Holton, MS; Soames, MS). That criticism seems misplaced. Firstly, the standard and the centred account seem on a par—they simply explain the same theoretical primitives in different ways. Further, as we just saw, the Centred Relativist_{att} may think of doxastic facts metaphysically as physico-functional facts; and as an *analytical* functionalist, Lewis treats doxastic truths not even as conceptually basic.

Another popular objection charges Centred Relativism_{att} of delivering flawed interpretations for a certain class of English sentences, in particular attitude reports or what might intuitively be classified as ‘self-ascriptions of properties’ (Holton, MS; Soames, 2014). But it is a mistake to interpret Centred Relativism_{att} as proposing a semantic analysis for certain English expressions. As Lewis has pointed out: “the connection of belief sentences with belief as characterised by doxastic alternatives is complicated and multifarious” (Lewis, 1986, p. 34). It is one thing to give a theory of attitudes, another to give a semantics for English attitude ascriptions (see also §4.1).

Even though the centred framework and its terminology is non-standard, the underlying view of representation is a natural one. We do not represent things from an objective, god’s eye view. We occupy a specific position *within* space and time and judge things as being a certain way from this perspective. Centred Relativism_{att} builds this perspectivalness into the very foundation of representation. It is not merely the representational *vehicles* which are bound to a context, rather, *what* we represent is itself perspectival. Centred Relativism_{att} seems more common-sensical and closer to the phenomena than Absolutism_{att}.

4 The Case for Attitudinal Absolutism

So far, we have encountered arguments for Relativism_{att}, and attempts to defuse objections against it. What about Absolutism_{att}? What are the considerations in its favour? The main points seem to be the following: i.) problems with Relativism_{att}; ii.) belief reports; iii.) Monism; and iv.) Transmission. To a large part, Absolutism_{att} seems motivated negatively, by the thought that Relativism_{att} is inherently unstable. Hopefully, I have convinced you that there is nothing wrong with Relativism_{att} *per se*. I will therefore concentrate on the other points.

4.1 Belief reports

Belief reports are commonly taken to provide an important source of evidence for Absolutism_{att}. Our use of phrases like “believe the same thing”, “has the same belief as”, etc. supposedly plays a very important role in deciding between different accounts of belief content (or propositions). The idea seems to be this: when it’s true to say “Aren and Juri believe the same thing”, there is something that Aren and Juri are both related to, i.e. a belief content; their negations tell us when different contents are involved; together, they provide identity conditions for contents. For instance, consider the following *reductio* against Relativism_{att} (Richard, 1981). *A week ago, Aren believed that it was raining. Today, Juri believes that it is raining. According to Relativism_{att}, it should be true to say: “Aren and Juri believe the same thing.” However, this sentence, and thus Relativism_{att}, is false.*

In fact, the significance of our everyday judgments about “same-believing” is very limited. First, it is doubtful whether they decisively support Absolutism_{att}; there are parallel cases where the corresponding report seems in fact correct (Aronszajn, 1996): *A week ago, Aren believed that Elvis was alive. Today, Juri believes that Elvis is alive. Hence, Aren and Juri believe the same thing.*²¹ More importantly, in order to discern the nature of belief contents we should look elsewhere. Consider the following analogy: It would be bad methodology to determine the nature of semantic values by focussing on the folk’s usage of “means the same as”. There is little reason to expect that the resulting conception of semantic values would be of much explanatory value, e.g. that semantic values thus construed would be compositional. Instead, we should determine the nature of semantic values by consulting our most successful semantic theory. The same goes for our conception of belief content. Rather than focussing on the folk’s use of “believes the same as”, we should consult our best systematic theory of belief. We can agree that the folk are onto something—ordinary belief reports may track *some* relation. What is questionable, in the first instance, is that this is the same relation as the one specified by a systematic theory of attitudes. In the likely case that the two differ, we can distinguish two relations: *belief_{folk}* and *belief_{theory}*. Arguably, *belief_{theory}* is of greater theoretical interest.²²

There is a closely related objection to Centered Relativism_{att}: the “account identifies contents that ought to be distinguished” on the one hand and “distinguishes contents that ought to be identified” on the other (Stalnaker, 2008, p. 50), see also (Soames, MS). On its own, the objection doesn’t have much force. It may be understood as an

²¹ For related observations about same-saying see (Lewis, 1980); for an attempt to defend Absolutism against these counterexamples see Salmon (2003).

²² Does this contradict the truism that *belief* is the relation which is denoted by our ordinary “believes that” predicate? Yes, but the claim isn’t a truism; I’m not alone in thinking this, a number of authors have noted a potential gap between the content of attitude reports and the content of the underlying attitudes (Lewis, 1986; Salmon, 1990; Bach, 1997; Chalmers, 2011).

appeal to our ordinary judgments about “same-believing”. In that case, it is vulnerable to the response above. Alternatively, it may be taken as the claim that the Relativist_{att}’s conception of content is *explanatorily* deficient. Then it has to be supported by additional considerations. Which conception of content is theoretically superior is precisely what is under discussion.²³

4.2 Monism

Does Monism—the claim that there is a unique realiser of the theoretical roles of propositions—provide evidence for Absolutism_{att}? Perhaps, Relativism and Monism don’t mesh. For instance, King (2003, 2007) appeals to Monism in his influential argument against semantic Relativism. This is too quick. Relativism as such is compatible with Monism—it may turn out that all propositional roles are realised by relativistic contents. Only when underscored by independent arguments for Absolutism about specific roles can Monism provide evidence against Relativism about other roles. For instance, King takes attitudinal Absolutism for granted and then uses Monism to argue against semantic Relativism. Can we reverse things and find support for Absolutism_{att} from Monism and Absolutism about other roles? It doesn’t seem so. In (Weber, 2012), I show that semantic Absolutism is untenable. In the next section, we’ll meet an argument against assertoric Absolutism. And I have already mentioned in the previous section that the referents of that-clauses don’t seem to conform to Absolutism in a straightforward way either. Rather than helping the Absolutist_{att}’s cause, Monism seems to favour the Relativist_{att}.

How bad would it be to abandon Monism? Why think that the propositional roles have the same realiser? Usually, Monism is accepted without much argument.²⁴ The main support for Monism seems to lie in considerations of simplicity and elegance. It is undeniable that there are close connections between the different roles. For instance, there is clearly an intimate relationship between the semantic value of a sentence and the content expressed by its assertion. Monism offers the simplest and most elegant account of that connection: it simply identifies the different realisers. For instance, it may claim that a sentence’s assertoric content simply is its semantic value.

However, appeal to explanatory virtues, such as simplicity and elegance, can easily be overturned by more substantial considerations. Monism is not the only feasible account of how the different roles mesh. An alternative is that different realisers, while not being identical, stand in a *determination* relation. For instance, the semantic value

²³ Stalnaker (2008) does provide additional reasons for thinking that Absolutism_{att} is superior (see §4.3).

²⁴ Typically, the term “proposition” is introduced by pointing to the different propositional roles; for instance McGrath (2012) writes: “The term ‘proposition’ [...] is used to refer to some or all of the following: the primary bearers of truth-value, the objects of belief and other propositional attitudes (i.e., what is believed, doubted, etc.), the referents of that-clauses, and the meanings of sentences”. I consider explicit arguments for Monism in (Weber, 2012, 2013b).

of a sentence may determine its assertoric content (Lewis, 1980). Ultimately, to judge the viability of Monism we will need to identify the realiser of each propositional role. That doesn't mean that we should consider these questions in isolation—the fact that a potential realiser is able to also play other roles should count in its favour. But it is arguably more important how well a proposed realiser plays a role relative to its alternatives to begin with. Other things being equal, Monism is preferable to Pluralism, but other things may not be equal.

There seem to be additional, more substantial arguments for specific versions of Monism, connecting particular roles. For instance, one may think that belief reports link the semantic values of sentences via the referents of that-clauses with the content of beliefs. Firstly, we note that belief reports embed *sentences*. This suggests that sentential semantic values are identical with the referents of that-clauses. Secondly, we assume that belief reports report beliefs. This suggests that the referents of that-clauses (and therefore the semantic values of sentences) are identical with the contents of beliefs. While this reasoning looks seductive, both steps have been questioned: above, I have questioned the second; for doubts about the first see (Cresswell, 1985, 2002).

What case can be made for the version of Monism under discussion here, which identifies attitude and assertoric content? Monism_{att-ass} seems to be part of a plausible story about communication, whether absolutistically or relativistically implemented. For one thing, it enables the Absolutist to accept the transmission account of communication. And even though the Relativist cannot accept this view (see §4.3), Monism_{att-ass} still plays an important role within her account of communication. It allows her to secure the intuition that utterances straightforwardly express the speaker's beliefs (see §6). Given the case for Relativism_{att}, the attractiveness of Monism_{att-ass} lends some support to assertoric Relativism. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that there is an account of communication on which the connection between attitudinal and assertoric content is less straightforward, i.e. which relinquishes Monism_{att-ass} altogether. Moreover, there are attempts (Egan, 2007; Moss, 2012) to combine Absolutism_{ass} and Relativism_{att} by restricting the class of beliefs we can express to those with absolute contents (the Relativist_{att} doesn't hold that *all* beliefs have relativistic contents). In §5, I will therefore give an additional argument for Relativism_{ass}.

4.3 Transmission

Absolutism_{att} may inherit some of Transmission's appeal: only the Absolutist_{att}, or so it seems, can validate this claim (Stalnaker, 1981, 2008; Torre, 2010; Weber, 2013a). For Stalnaker, this is the main motivation for holding on to Absolutism_{att}:

The reason I thought, and continue to think, that it is important to represent the contents of indexical beliefs as impersonal propositions is that we want our notion of content to help explain persistence and change of belief,

agreement and disagreement between believers, and *the communication of belief*. (Stalnaker, 1999a, p. 20; my emphasis)

And the transmission model of communication has received perhaps its most elegant and powerful elaboration in Stalnaker’s hands (Stalnaker, 1978).

There are doubts about the tenability of Transmission, orthogonal to the issues under discussion here (Weber, MS). It doesn’t seem plausible that communicative success requires *identity* in content between speaker and hearer. Different subjects frequently associate (slightly) different contents with an expression. The transmission account seems to predict that failure of communication is equally frequent. It is less revisionary to assume that successful communication merely requires a sufficient degree of *similarity* or *overlap* of the content expressed by the speaker and the one acquired by the hearer.²⁵

Let’s put this worry to the side and grant that compatibility with Transmission is a plus. Why does the Relativist_{att} have to abandon Transmission? Simply put, assuming that relativistic contents are straightforwardly transmitted in communication leads to terrible predictions about what happens in successful communication. Imagine I utter “I have Torsonic Polarity Syndrome”, thereby expressing my self-locating belief that I have Torsonic Polarity Syndrome. If the relativistic content of that belief were transmitted to you, you would come to learn that *you yourself* have Torsonic Polarity Syndrome (while remaining agnostic about my state). Obviously, this is communicative breakdown, rather than success.²⁶

That the Relativist_{att} can’t avail herself of the transmission model of communication is a cost, but it doesn’t seem particularly high. First of all, she has an alternative: the Recentring model presented in §6. Furthermore, it seems that the Absolutist_{att} has to ultimately pay the same price. Not every version of Absolutism_{att} is compatible with Transmission. The one that seemed able to account for self-location, Indexical Russellianism, cannot maintain it. Roughly, the problem for the Russellian is the following: Consider once more my belief *I have Torsonic Polarity Syndrome*; according to Russellianism, its content is the singular proposition that *Clas has Torsonic Polarity Syndrome*. One would expect that my utterance of “I have Torsonic Polarity Syndrome” also expresses this proposition. But it cannot be what my audience learns. It is the defining mark of Indexical Russellian that only I can grasp it. It is hopeless trying to assign a qualitative surrogate content to the utterance (see §5.2 and (Weber, 2014)). Like the Relativist_{att}, the Russellian is bound to say that what the hearer learns isn’t what the

²⁵ Things aren’t quite that straightforward; the mere fact that there is variation in content between speaker and hearer doesn’t show that there isn’t *also* a shared content. I lay out the problems for Transmission in more detail in (Weber, MS).

²⁶ Again, things are actually more complicated. The problem doesn’t occur with every piece of relativistic content. Also, there are attempts of bringing Relativism_{att} into harmony with Transmission (Egan, 2007; Moss, 2012). I doubt that these attempts are successful (see §5 and (Torre, 2010; Weber, 2013a)).

speaker expressed, i.e. she has to abandon Transmission.

The problem isn't restricted to Indexical Russellianism. Indexical Russellianism is a response to a general difficulty for Absolutism_{att}. Absolutism_{att} tries to explain self-locating beliefs in terms of impersonal and eternal contents. *Prima facie*, it seems that we can be related to these contents in ordinary, 3rd personal ways, i.e. without having the corresponding self-locating attitudes. The Absolutist_{att} cannot grant this possibility, as it would make her account incomplete. She therefore has to assume that the relevant contents are accessible only in a special 1st personal manner. But that forces her to surrender Transmission, since the relevant content will be accessible in that way only to either the speaker or the hearer, but not both. Any viable form of Absolutism_{att}, it seems, will be in conflict with Transmission.

Summing up: we didn't find strong arguments for Absolutism_{att}, counterbalancing the case for Relativism_{att}. The best support seemed to come from Transmission. In the end, that impression turned out to be illusory, since tenable versions of Absolutism_{att} clash with Transmission as well.

5 Against Assertoric Absolutism

5.1 Semantic value, assertoric content, conveyed content

Do some assertions, just like certain beliefs, have relativistic contents, or is Relativism about belief content best combined with Absolutism about assertoric content (Egan, 2007; Moss, 2012)? First, we have to get a clear about the distinction between a sentence's semantic value and its assertoric content (Lewis, 1980; Dummett, 1991). The two perform different, though closely related, theoretical roles. Sentential semantic values have two main jobs: i.) they determine truth conditions, ii.) they determine the semantic values of larger expressions in which they are embedded. The first role provides the rationale behind devising a semantic theory to begin with. We want a systematic account of a certain type of behavior: the use of linguistic symbols. The central point of this behaviour is the transmission of information. A highly plausible account of how strings of linguistic symbols manage to transmit information is to assume that the users of the language associate sentences with sets of situations in which the sentences are true/false, i.e. truth conditions. The second role demands that semantic values are *compositional*. To explain how we are able to communicate under time constraints using novel sentences, we had better assume that the semantic values of complex sentences are compositionally determined by the semantic values of their parts (Pagin and Westerståhl, 2010).

That semantic values of sentences play a vital role in an account of the linguistic exchange of information doesn't imply that they are *identical* with the relevant information. Their role merely demands that they *determine* this information. The information which a systematic theory of linguistic communication assigns to a sentence is its *as-*

sertoric content.²⁷ Unlike semantic values, assertoric contents are freed to some extent from the confines of compositionality. Further, in contrast to semantic values, assertoric contents are required to be potential objects of attitudes, as their central role lies within a systematic account of how individuals' belief systems change in communication. They share with semantic values the feature of being constrained by considerations of simplicity, parsimony and systematicity. In that, assertoric content contrasts with *conveyed content*. Unlike assertoric content, conveyed content is context-specific and variable. It is typically richer than assertoric content, subject to various kinds of pragmatic inferences, such as Gricean implicatures and pragmatic enrichments (Grice, 1989; Recanati, 2004). Contrary to conveyed contents, assertoric contents are associated in a stable and conventional manner with sentences. Competent speakers will know the assertoric content of a sentence merely in virtue of their linguistic competence. On the other hand, the notion of assertoric content abstracts away from information that is common to any utterance whatsoever; it does, for instance, not include the information that *sentences exists*, that *an utterance has been made*, etc. These features are not in general shared by conveyed content.

5.2 The argument from self-locating utterances

Assertoric Absolutists claim that all utterances, even indexical ones, express impersonal and eternal assertoric contents. For instance, uttered at t_1 , "It is raining now" expresses the eternal content that *It is raining at t_1* . Uttered by Aren, "I have Torsonic Polarity Syndrome" expresses the impersonal content that *Aren has Torsonic Polarity Syndrome*. On this picture, it should be possible to express the same eternal and impersonal content with the right non-indexical sentence. However, it seems that indexical sentences and their alleged non-indexical counterparts systematically differ in the information they convey. Absolutism_{ass} has problems accounting for this difference, whereas Centred Relativism_{ass} has a straightforward explanation. This is the central idea behind the argument of this section.

The most natural proposal is that we can form the relevant pairs of utterances by replacing indexical expressions with co-referential names; call these pairs of utterances *indexical pairs* (IPs). Here are two examples:

- (IP1) Today is March 28, 2014.
- (IP1*) March 28, 2014 is March 28, 2014.

- (IP2) This is Aren.
- (IP2*) Aren is Aren.

The respective contexts are such that "Today" and "March 28, 2014" co-refer, as do "This" and "Aren". According to Absolutism_{ass}, the members of each pair have the

²⁷ It is of course a *prima facie* option that semantic values and assertoric contents are identical.

same assertoric content. However, that is very implausible. It seems obvious that they express different contents: (IP1) and (IP2) are informative, (IP1*) and (IP2*) aren't.

1. *Assertoric Absolutism*: According to $\text{Absolutism}_{\text{ass}}$, members of indexical pairs have the same assertoric content.
2. *Assertoric Content Difference*: Members of indexical pairs don't have the same assertoric content.
3. *Conclusion*: $\text{Absolutism}_{\text{ass}}$ is inadequate.

Above, we have sketched the motivation behind *Assertoric Absolutism*, but doubts may remain. I will try to dissipate them. First, can't $\text{Absolutists}_{\text{ass}}$ claim that indexical utterances and their non-indexical counterparts differ in assertoric content, since indexicals make singular reference, while names have a descriptive/qualitative content? Ultimately, this doesn't seem to be plausible option, since Descriptivism and Absolutism don't form a stable package. Descriptivism is only viable as Indexical Descriptivism, i.e. as the claim that the associated descriptive contents are often self-locating (Putnam, 1975; Jackson, 1998). Descriptivism leads back to Relativism.

Reversely, $\text{Absolutists}_{\text{ass}}$ might think the equivalence fails since indexical utterances express descriptive/qualitative contents, while their counterparts express singular contents. This suggestion doesn't seem to work either—indexical utterances don't express qualitative contents. Assume that I believe that we're living in a symmetrical universe and wonder whether I'm *Righty* (living on the "right" side of the universe) or *Lefty* (living on the "left" side of the universe). You can remove the option that I'm *Righty* from my doxastic possibilities by uttering "You're *Lefty*". No qualitative information could have achieved this, since *Righty* and *Lefty* are perfect qualitative duplicates.²⁸ It seems that there is at least a strong *prima facie* case for *Assertoric Absolutism*.²⁹

Next, consider the second premise, *Assertoric Content Difference*. In a nutshell, the rationale behind this premise is the following: it is undeniable that members of indexical pairs typically convey different pieces of information; the best explanation for this is that they have different assertoric contents.

1. *Information Difference*: Members of indexical pairs differ in the information they provide.

²⁸ Ultimately, this point isn't that crucial; we can run a parallel argument where indexical pairs are formed by replacing indexical expressions with the corresponding qualitative descriptions.

²⁹ A position I haven't explicitly considered is the Neo-Fregean account of Evans (1981). Could a Neo-Fregean like Evans reject *Assertoric Absolutism*? Perhaps, but Evans's position doesn't seem to be a version of Absolutism. True, he holds that the truth conditional content of self-locating beliefs and utterances is absolute. But it is not this content which plays the relevant theoretical roles. The entities which do fulfill them are complex structures which essentially involve egocentric acquaintance relations (or *ways of thinking*). It seems therefore more appropriate to classify Evans as a Relativist.

2. *Assertoric Content Explanation*: This informational difference is best explained by a difference in assertoric content.
3. *Assertoric Content Difference*: Members of indexical pairs don't have the same assertoric content.

Information Difference seems uncontroversial. It's simply a datum that members of ordinary IPs differ strikingly with regards to the information they convey, the role they play in rational cognition, and the actions they dispose us to undertake. What we learn from an utterance of "Today is March 28, 2014." is different and more interesting than what we learn from "March 28, 2014 is March 28, 2014".

The crucial premise is *Assertoric Content Explanation*. Is the fact that the utterances have different informational values best explained by a difference in assertoric content? While this seems very plausible, it is not entirely beyond doubt. In light of the distinction between assertoric and conveyed content, Absolutists_{ass} could insist that they can explain all the data purely in terms of conveyed content. However, providing such an explanation is no easy task. The informational differences between IPs are highly systematic. IPs don't just convey different information in special contexts or to some individuals. Rather, the differences are more or less universal. In the above examples, a typical subject will find one member interesting, the other boring. Even for someone who already believes that today is March 28, 2014, there will be a difference between (IP1) and (IP1*): (IP1) will (minimally) raise their credence that today is March 28, 2014, while (IP1*) will leave it untouched. Similarly for other IPs. An utterance of "A comet will hit our city in 5 minutes" will make me more confident that a comet will hit us very soon, than an utterance of "A comet will hit Perth on March 28, 2014 at 3 45 PM".³⁰ The initial problem for the Absolutist_{ass} is to give an explanation for this systematic difference, which relies only on conveyed content. An additional difficulty is that the explanation's very systematicity gives us a reason to think that the relevant information is actually part of assertoric content— it perfectly matches the characterisation of assertoric content's theoretical role.

While this suggests that any explanation of the data will, if successful, postulate a difference in assertoric content, I don't want to rule out that the Absolutist_{ass} might be able to devise an alternative explanation. The most promising strategy, it seems to me, is to follow Stalnaker (1979) and appeal to diagonal propositions. Indexical utterances and their non-indexical counterparts express the same assertoric content—in the above examples, both utterances have trivial assertoric contents. However, they may *convey* different diagonal contents through a process of pragmatic re-interpretation, triggered by uncertainty about the relevant contextual features.³¹ In effect, this proposal is very

³⁰ The only exceptions seem to be subjects who assign credence 1 to the propositions that locate their present context. However, such subjects are *extremely* rare, if they exist at all.

³¹ If having credence of less than 1 in the proposition that locates one's context is sufficient to set off pragmatic re-interpretation for indexical utterances, this process is basically always operative.

similar to the centred account I advertise (see §6). Still, there are subtle, but important differences. One difference is that I take diagonal contents to be relativistic contents, i.e. sets of centred possible worlds. This allows us to identify the content of self-locating utterances with the content of the self-locating beliefs they express. Stalnaker thinks of diagonal utterance contents as singular propositions (sets of possible worlds) about the utterance token. The content of the self-locating belief the speaker is giving voice to, on the other hand, is plausibly not a meta-*linguistic* content about the *utterance* token, since, we may assume, she had the belief before performing the utterance. The meta-*linguistic* account of self-locating assertions is naturally combined with a meta-*cognitive* account of self-locating beliefs, i.e. as beliefs about *thought* tokens. The ensuing picture faces several difficulties.³² First, it detaches attitude content from utterance content and thereby relinquishes Transmission. Self-locating utterances neither express nor convey the speaker’s self-locating beliefs. Secondly, it seems psychologically unrealistic. It is implausible that one can think about oneself only mediately by thinking about one’s thought-tokens. Worse, token-reflexive contents fail to capture the cognitive significance of self-locating beliefs and utterances. It seems possible to believe a token-reflexive proposition in a 3rd personal way, e.g. by accessing it through a Chalmersian Cosmoscope, while lacking the relevant self-locating information (Perry, 2001; Chalmers, 2011). If the token-reflexive propositions really captured the cognitive significance of self-locating beliefs and utterances, this should be impossible. Lastly, it is questionable whether ordinary subjects are able to grasp singular propositions involving concrete objects, including utterance/thought tokens (Lewis, 1981).

Absolutism_{ass} has difficulties accommodating the data; Centred Relativism_{ass}, on the other hand, has a simple and straightforward explanation, as we will see in the next section: informational differences between members of IPs are grounded directly in differences in assertoric content. Absolutists_{ass} might admit that Relativism_{ass} has greater explanatory benefits, but insist that Relativism_{ass} is inferior, since it also seems to have greater costs. A worry may be that Relativism_{ass} is accompanied by a flawed semantics (often, the distinction between semantic values and assertoric contents isn’t drawn to begin with). Relativism_{ass}, so the thought, is incompatible with *semantic* Absolutism and a Kaplanian treatment of indexicals expressions as directly referential. This concern is unfounded. Relativists_{ass} are able to endorse the standard Kaplanian semantics for indexicals, and they can in principle even accept semantic Absolutism. I have, however, already mentioned that semantic Absolutism is infeasible (Weber, 2012). Kaplan himself is a semantic Relativist—he thinks that a compositional treatment of temporal constructions, such as “It was the case that”, requires sentential semantic values to be time relative, i.e. this is his famous “Operator Argument” (Kaplan, 1989, p. 503), see also (Lewis, 1980). Many seem to think that King (2003, 2007) has managed to salvage semantic Absolutism from Kaplan’s attack (McGrath, 2012). That’s a misperception—

³² These points seem to apply equally to the proposal of Perry (2001).

semantic Absolutism fails even on King’s alternative extensional treatment of tense and temporal expressions (Weber, 2012).

In contrast to Absolutism_{ass}, Centred Relativism_{ass} offers a natural and straightforward explanation of why members of indexical pairs convey different pieces of information; further, the explanation doesn’t have untoward semantic commitments. Centred content seems better suited than absolute content to play the theoretical role of assertoric content—Centred Relativism_{ass} is preferable to Absolutism_{ass}. Again, this is not a knock-down argument. But a viable version of assertoric Absolutism has to tackle the challenge of offering an account of the phenomena that is as attractive as the one offered by Centred Relativism_{ass}.

6 Centred Communication

On the Absolutist’s conception of intentionality, beliefs and utterances represent what the world is like. Trusting an utterance is to believe that the world is as the speaker represents it to be. Since hearer and speaker inhabit the same world, the hearer can straightforwardly treat the asserted information as a true characterisation of her own situation. The relativistic picture of representation is different. Beliefs and assertions represent what the thinker’s or speaker’s *centred* world is like.³³ For an utterance to be correct is for it to be a true characterisation of the speaker’s centred world. While speaker and hearer live in the same world, they don’t share the same *centred* world. An utterance that correctly describes the speaker’s situation isn’t necessarily also an accurate representation of the hearer’s. To gain information about her own location, the hearer has to make an inference from information about a different one. To do so, she has to locate the utterance context in relation to her own position. In contrast to the transmission model, where one piece of content travels from speaker to hearer, the model involves two separate pieces: the content expressed by the speaker, the *expressed content*, and the content acquired by the hearer, the *acquired content*. The following is a rational reconstruction of how the hearer can derive the acquired content from the expressed content.³⁴

The Recentring Model

1. The hearer encounters an utterance “u”. [Perceiving]
2. The hearer believes that the content expressed by “u” is true of the speaker’s centred world. [Centring]

³³ I am assuming that the content of the utterance is identical to that of the speaker’s belief. It seems feasible to identify utterance content with that of the hearer’s belief instead (Weber, 2013a, §6).

³⁴ The model is described and motivated in more detail in (Weber, 2013a); a similar model has been sketched by Heim (2004).

3. The hearer believes that her actual centred world is R -related to the speaker's centred world. [Locating]
4. The hearer infers information about her own centred world from 2. & 3. [Recentring]

Some comments: First, the hearer comes across an utterance token. In typical cases, she is spatio-temporally close to the speaker, but sometimes she isn't. In the *Centring* step, the hearer does two things: she associates a certain content with the utterance and, in typical cases, treats it as a correct representation of the speaker's context. In other words, she understands and trusts the utterance. She then has to locate the speaker's centred world. She doesn't have to do that in an objective way, it's sufficient to do it relative to her own position. And even if she knows next to nothing about the utterance context, there is a relation she can always rely upon: cw_h and cw_s stand in R just in case cw_s is the centred world where the utterance was produced that the agent of cw_h is perceiving at the time of cw_h . Put more simply: she can always locate the speaker's context as the situation in which the utterance she's presently perceiving was produced. Lastly, she infers information about her own centred world by putting together the information from the Centring and the Locating step; i.e. she re-centres the acquired content on herself.

Consider a simple example. Ani shouts to Aren: "There is a puddle over here". First, Aren *centres* the utterance content on the speaker's context: he thinks that the asserted content is the set of centred worlds with puddles near the centre, and he assumes that the actual utterance context is one of them; he comes to believe *there is a puddle near the speaker*. In a second step he locates the utterance context, *the speaker is behind the tree in front of me*. Finally, he *recentres* the inferred content on himself: he comes to believe *there is a puddle behind the tree in front of me*.

How does the hearer zero in on the right assertoric/expressed content? A sentence's assertoric content is the diagonal of its character (Kaplan, 1989). In line with assertoric content's theoretical role, it is associated with sentences in a stable, conventional manner; it is context-invariable and can be grasped merely in virtue of linguistic competence. Since she doesn't have to identify assertoric content and semantic value, the Centred Relativist_{ass} can be conservative about semantics and adopt the familiar Kaplanian semantics for indexicals.

Centred Relativism_{ass} straightforwardly handles the argument from indexical pairs. Even though members of IPs have the same semantic value in context (i.e. Kaplanian content), they express different assertoric contents, in virtue of their different characters. Consider (IP1) and (IP1*). The assertoric content of "Today is March 28, 2014" is the set of centred worlds whose centre lies within March 28, 2014. This is the sentence's diagonal and the content of the expressed belief *today is March 28, 2014*. Importantly, it is an interesting centred content, including some centred worlds, excluding others. In contrast, the assertoric content of "March 28, 2014 is March 28, 2014" is the set of all

centred worlds; a trivial content. Given these different inputs at the Centring stage, it isn't hard to see how the hearer ends up with two different acquired contents, one interesting, one trivial. This explanation generalises to other IPs, as their assertoric contents differ analogously.

The centred model of communication straightforwardly explains why IPs systematically provide different pieces of information. And it nicely complements the centred account of belief, preserving Monism_{att-ass}. We have arrived at a unified centred account of thought and communication.

7 Conclusion

A comprehensive account of mental and linguistic intentionality that covers the wide range of self-locating beliefs and utterances will be relativistic, or so I have argued. Our respective thoughts and assertions represent the world from different perspectives—everyone of us is at the centre of her own beliefs and utterances. This doesn't mean that their content is private and unsharable. But when we exchange our views of the world with each other, we have to take into account our distinct locations within it. The added complexity of the relativistic account might not have to be considered a downside—it is simply a reflection of the cognitive situation we find ourselves in.³⁵

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