

## Frege, Reference Shifts, and Attitude Reports

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I must confess that I am not well versed in the philosophy of language. I am interested in value theory. However, that interest has included an interest in desire as a propositional attitude.

So, I was interested in the paper topic:

*Fully but succinctly reconstruct Frege's account of reference shifts in attitude reports.*

*Exactly what's the role of substitutivity and context in the account? And why must such shifts be shifts to the customary senses of the relevant expressions rather than to whatever other entities? Is the account satisfactory? Why or why not?*

My plan was to use 'desires' rather than 'beliefs' as the token "attitude report".

Unfortunately, I could not find a way to make this work. When I tried to apply Frege's account of reference shifts to desire reports I could not see a reference shift.

At first glance, what I wrote above may appear to be mistaken. After all, if Lois Lane were given a dangerous assignment, it makes sense that she would not want Clark Kent with her, but she would want Superman to be there. However, it would be a mistake to confuse what Lois Lane would say that she desires with what she desires in fact. Her statement about what she desires expresses a belief, which would be subject to reference shifts on Frege's account. The presence of a reference shift in her beliefs does not imply a reference shift in her desire.

I am presenting this paper in two parts. In the first part, I will try to reconstruct Frege's account of reference shifts in belief attitudes, answering the question above. However, I am tacking on an optional extension explaining the difficulty in applying this to desire attitudes.

## Part I: Belief Attitudes and Reference Shifts

The standard description of the problem of reference in attitude reports begins with the hypothesis that, in any regular sentence, one can replace a term with a co-referent and not change the truth value. Thus (assuming a world where Superman exists as described in the comic), the following sentence would be true:

*(1) Superman is not human,*

In this sentence, we can replace 'Superman' with its co-referent 'Clark Kent' and get a statement that is still true.

*(2) Clark Kent is not human,*

In fact, every statement about Superman is true if and only if that statement is also true of Clark Kent, since Superman and Clark Kent are the same person.

However, this is not the case when we talk about Lois Lane's beliefs about Superman.

Assuming that we are looking at the period before Lois Lane discovered Superman's identity, the following would be true:

*(3) Lois Lane believes that Superman is not human*

However, if we replace 'Superman' with its co-referent 'Clark Kent', we get a statement that is no longer true:

*(4) Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent is not human*

This seems to leave us with two options:

Option 1: Give up the idea that replacing a term with a co-referent preserves truth value, or

Option 2: Hypothesize that terms in propositions that are the objects of belief reports refer to the same thing as those terms in regular sentences.

Frege preferred the second option. He argued that attitude reports (not just belief reports) involved a shift in reference from Superman or Clark Kent to the sense of the terms 'Superman' or 'Clark Kent' (i.e., the thought generally associated with the terms). Since 'the sense of the term Superman' and 'the sense of the term Clark Kent' are not co-referents, we need not expect – under the principle that substituting co-referents preserves truth value – that replacing one term with the other will preserve truth value. They are not co-referents.

Also, I should note that the co-referent is the sense of the term, as opposed to (for example), Lois' 'idea' of Clark Kent and Superman. Since language is used to communicate, a term in that language such as "Clark Kent" or "Superman" will have little use if its sense were those of an individual person. The sense of a term is shared, allowing one person who uses the term to communicate with another. Ideas, on the other hand, belong to individuals. Lois' idea of Superman is hers alone, as is her idea of Clark Kent. We could, if we wanted, refer to Lois' idea using a shared concept (e.g., the phrase, "Lois' idea of Superman"). However, insofar as we are engaged in communication, we are using shared concepts or senses, not ideas.

Intuitively, Frege's hypothesis of a reference shift when we switch from talking about things to people's beliefs makes sense. After all, when I am talking about what Lois Lane believes I am not talking about Superman or Clark Kent. I am talking about the organizational structure of Lois Lane's brain and how it influences her behavior. There must be some difference between Lois Lane's beliefs about Superman and her beliefs about Clark Kent that explains and predicts the different ways she may respond with respect to each term. Specifically, they must explain why she would answer, "Yes" to the question, "Did Superman come from another planet?" and, "No" to the same question asked about Clark Kent.

Here, then, we have Frege's account of reference shifts in belief reports. We are told that these reference shifts occur in all attitude reports. However, when I tried to apply it to desire reports, I could not make it work.

To evaluate desires, we first need to distinguish belief statements from desire statements. This is not an easy thing to do. If Lois is asked whether she desires to take (desires that she take) Clark Kent with her on a dangerous assignment, she can sensibly answer, "No, I do not want Clark to come along. I will have enough to worry about."

Is this a desire claim, or a belief claim?

We hypothesize that Lois believes that Clark is human. Insofar as she believes this, she is likely to assert in appropriate circumstances that the statement, "Clark is human" is true. However, we cannot infer either from her belief or from the statement she is willing to make that the proposition, "Clark is human" is true. In fact, we know that this is false.

Similarly, we can hypothesize that Lois does not want Clark to go with her on this dangerous assignment. We can further expect her to say in the relevant circumstances, "I do not want Clark to come with me on this dangerous assignment." However, this does not allow us to infer, "Lois does not want Clark to come along." That would be like inferring the truth of "Clark is human" above. Yet, this is the question we need to ask if we are looking for reference shifts in desires. Is the statement, "Lois does not want Clark to come along" actually true?

Let us assume that Jimmy Olson has discovered that Clark Kent is Superman, and Clark has sworn him to secrecy. When he learns that Lois is about to go on a dangerous assignment, he tells Lois, "Take Clark with you." When Lois says that she does not want Clark to come along, Jimmy could sensibly respond, "No, you want to take Clark with you. Trust me."

If Jimmy were to be making such an assertion, he would be saying that “Lois does not want Clark to come along” is, in fact, false. In fact, Jimmy is tying the truth of “Lois wants Clark with her on this dangerous assignment” is tied to “Lois wants Superman with her on this dangerous assignment.” In other words, Jimmy is giving us an account of what Lois wants that treats Clark Kent and Superman as co-referents insofar as both terms refer to the same person.

I think Jimmy has it right. When talking about what Lois desires, the report refers to the actual people, not to the sense of the term. We experience the reference shift only when we are talking about what Lois believes that she wants.

It would be difficult to construct a close analogy between belief attitudes and desire attitudes because each is a different type of relationship between the agent and the proposition.

Let's try this:

(1') Clark will accompany Lois on this dangerous assignment.

(2') Superman will accompany Lois on this dangerous assignment.

Without a reference shift, 1' is true iff 2' is true.

Now, we look at desire.

(3') Lois desires that Clark will accompany her on this dangerous assignment.

(4') Lois desires that Superman will accompany her on this dangerous assignment.

It appears that 3' is false while 4' is true – that the truth value changes when we make the propositions objects of a propositional attitude. On Frege's account, the reference of "Clark" and "Superman" respectively shifts from the person himself to the senses of the terms "Clark" and "Superman".

At this point, we seem to have little more than a difference of opinion. Frege is telling us that 3' is false. Jimmy is telling us that 3' is true but only appears false because we are giving too much credit to what Lois believes that she wants and not actually looking at what she wants in fact. What Lois wants in fact is to come home safe from the mission. Towards that end, she would want Clark to with her if and only if she would want Superman to go with her. We experience Frege's reference shift when we look at what Lois believes that she wants, but the reference shift does not occur when we look at what she really wants.

Ultimately, I think that Jimmy is correct. Lois really wants to take Clark on this mission and simply does not know it. Lois' actual desire is that she come home safely from this dangerous mission. When she combines this with the false belief that Clark is clumsy and would make the mission even more dangerous we get the conclusion that she does not want Clark along. When we mix Lois' desire with the false belief we get a conclusion that is also false. When we combine Lois' desire with the fact that Clark Kent is Superman we get the true conclusion that Lois wants Clark to go with her on this mission. Furthermore, Lois wants Clark to go with her on this mission if and only if she wants Superman to go with her on this mission. The referents of the term when they are the object of an actual desire refer to the person, not to the sense of the terms.

Fully defending such a claim would take a lot more work. Unfortunately, I have run out of words.

Perhaps what I have written at least suggests the possibility that Frege's account of reference shifts applies to beliefs and not desires. However, I did give this thesis a lot more thought, and I have included additional considerations in an appendix.

## Appendix: A Little More Work

I wrote above that I thought that it would take a lot more work to show that propositions that are the objects of desire attitudes do not undergo a reference shift.

What follows is at least *a little* more work in that respect.

When I failed to come up with a reference shift for desire attitudes in the Superman case, I began to consider other cases.

One example that I had been thinking about for other reasons comes from Bernard Williams. Williams asked us to consider the case of a person he identified only as the Agent who ordered a gin and tonic.<sup>1</sup> In this case, the bartender actually filled the glass with gasoline (in Williams' example), though, for the sake of the story, I prefer an option where the bartender filled the glass with poison.

In the case that I want to consider, the night before going on this dangerous assignment with Lois Lane and Clark Kent, Jimmy Olson is in the same bar as the Agent. He sees the bartender put poison into the Agent's glass and serve it to the Agent. As the Agent goes to take a drink from the glass, Jimmy puts his hand over the top and tells the Agent, "You don't want to do that."

My objective here is to further illustrate the thesis that a proposition that is the object of a desire attitude does not undergo a reference shift. The Agent, we may assume, believes that the glass contains the gin and tonic he ordered and, consequently, he believes that he does want to take a sip of what is in the glass. But does he actually desire to take a sip of what is in the glass? Jimmy says he does not.

Note that the Agent's response to Jimmy's statement is not necessarily to assert that Jimmy is obviously mistaken. If Jimmy has said, "You don't believe that you want to take a sip of what is in this glass," he

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, Bernard (1979). Internal and External Reasons. In Ross Harrison (ed.), *Rational Action*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 101-113.

would have said something that is clearly false. In fact, we have stipulated that it is false – the Agent does (at least at the moment) believe that he wants to take a sip of what is in the glass.

However, Jimmy’s statement, “You don’t want to do that,” (or, “You do not desire that you take a drink of what is in this glass”) can still be true. The Agent himself recognizes this possibility. It would be perfectly rational for the him to respond to Jimmy by asking, “Why not?” In asking this question, the Agent is asking for reason to believe that the proposition, “I do not desire that I take a sip of what is in this glass” is true. This admits to the possibility that, “I do not desire that I take a sip of what is in this glass” could be true.

Furthermore, the truth of the proposition, “I desire that I take a sip of what is in this glass” depends precisely on what is in this glass – whether it is gin and tonic or poison. If it is gin and tonic, “I desire that I take a sip of what is in this glass” is true. If it is poison, then the statement is false. Determining its truth does not involve shifting the reference to the Agent’s sense of what is in the glass. We are interested in what is actually in the glass.

After Jimmy answers the Agent’s question, “Why not?” by telling him that the bartender filled the glass with poison, the Agent recognizes that Jimmy’s earlier statement, “You do not want to do that,” (meaning “You do not desire that you take a sip of what is in the glass”) is true. It did not become true once Jimmy gave him the new information. It was true before Jimmy told him, and Jimmy simply provided the Agent with a reason to believe (emphasis on ‘believe’) what was already true.

Let me try a third case.

Jimmy is out on this dangerous assignment with Lois Lane and Clark Kent. However, they have left him behind to help a local mechanic repair their damaged vehicle while Clark and Lois go on ahead to the villain’s stronghold.

As the mechanic works on the vehicle, she gets to a point where she needs to remove a particular bolt and tells Jimmy to hand her a 10mm socket. However, the 10mm socket is too small for that bolt. The bolt actually requires an 11mm socket.

There are a few ways that this can play out.

One way is to say that Jimmy knows that bolt in question requires an 11mm socket. He has worked on this vehicle before and happens to remember that fact. Therefore, he hands the mechanic the 11mm socket. Yes, the mechanic asked for the 10mm socket. However, Jimmy knew that the mechanic was asking for the socket that would work on that bolt, and “the socket that would work on that bolt” is co-referential with the 11mm socket. The mechanic may have asked for the 10mm socket, but that is not what the mechanic really wanted.

Or we could have it that Jimmy handed her the 10mm socket she asked for. The mechanic tries it, finds out that it does not work, and hands it back, saying, “That’s not the one I want. Give me the 11mm socket.” The mechanic, in discovering her mistake, will say that, just a minute ago, she believed that she wanted the 10mm socket, but she had been mistaken. The say that a belief that P is mistaken is to say that one believes that P, and P was false. So, when the mechanic says that her earlier belief that she wanted a 10mm socket was mistaken, she is actually saying that her earlier statement that she wanted the 10mm socket was false.

Or we can imagine a case in which the mechanic does not even ask for a socket. Seeing that the mechanic has reached the step that requires removing a bolt that requires an 11mm socket, Jimmy hands her that socket. The mechanic was about to ask for a 10mm socket, but takes the socket Jimmy hands her. When she tests the bolt on the socket and discovers that it fits, she comes to believe that Jimmy handed her a 10mm socket. Jimmy does not need to know anything about the mechanic’s

representations to give the mechanic what she wants. He simply needs to know that “the 11mm socket” is co-referential with “the socket that will work on that bolt”.

A part of the reason why I sense some difficulty for Frege here is that attitude reports are not just a type of sentence in a language. Propositional attitudes – beliefs and desires – are supposed to have a causal role in explaining and predicting intentional actions. Consequently, we cannot just look at our linguistic intuitions when examining these reports. We have to look for the best explanation of intentional actions.

In this light, let us examine the actions of the Agent. When the Agent entered the bar, he had a desire that he have a gin and tonic. This explains why he ordered a gin and tonic. When the agent served him his drink, he still had the same desire that he have a gin and tonic and the false belief that the drink served to him was a gin and tonic. Later, when Jimmy stopped him from taking a drink out of the glass, Jimmy’s statement, “You don’t want to do that,” was correct. The Agent’s desire was to drink a gin and tonic, not to drink the poison that was in the glass.

We can give the same analysis to the actions of the mechanic. The mechanic wanted to repair the vehicle. This required that she remove the bolt, which meant that she wanted the socket that would allow her to remove the bolt. She has a false belief that the 10mm socket would fit the bolt. Here, Jimmy, correctly deduced that she wanted the 11mm socket – the socket co-referential with “the socket that would fit that bolt.”

Now, let’s apply this to the case to the claim that Lois does not want Clark to go with her on this dangerous assignment. I wish to argue that 3’ in the article was true – and was true if and only if 4’ was true.

(3’) Lois desires that Clark will accompany her on this dangerous assignment.

(4') Lois desires that Superman will accompany her on this dangerous assignment.

What Lois actually desires is that she come back from the dangerous assignment in one piece. This desire, combined with her (false) belief that Clark was clumsy and prone to make the assignment even more dangerous resulted in her (false) belief that she did not want Clark to go with her on this assignment. What Jimmy could tell her, if Clark had not sworn him to secrecy, is, "Contrary to what you currently believe, having Clark with you will make it more likely that you come back from this assignment in one piece. Therefore, you really want to take Clark with you."

When we properly distinguish what Lois desires from what she believes that she desires, Jimmy shows us that, when it comes to what Lois actually desires, 3' and 4' are both true. In fact, 3' is true if and only if 4' is true. And this is because, when a proposition is made the object of a desire attitude (rather than a belief attitude), there is no reference shift. A person with a "desire that P" is attempting to make P true in the real world, and whatever makes P true in the real world is that which fulfills the desire. Because Clark Kent and Superman are the same person, if taking Clark with her will make P true if and only if taking Superman with her will make P true.

There is no reference shift when it comes to desires, only for beliefs.