

Neutral or Standard Propositions?

Why appeal to disagreement and belief retention is no good

We shall name “Propositional Neutralists” those theorists that believe that there are non-standard propositions such as time-neutral propositions. These theorists are all followers of the Lewis-Kaplan conception of propositions as functions from at least worlds and times to truth-values. In contrast, we shall name “Propositional Specifists” those who believe in standard propositions cashed out as sets of possible worlds. These authors are usually inspired by Frege in conceiving propositions as incorporating e.g. reference to a time. Our aim in this paper is to assess some arguments that have been advanced by each of these camps, and draw a methodological moral.

1. Neutralists on disagreement

Neutralists on propositions are, nowadays, also known as Relativists. Relativists such as MacFarlane (2007) introduce neutral propositions in order to explain certain forms of disagreement. For example, take the following exchange:

[Beer]

Mary, at 4pm: “I am drinking beer”

John, at 5 pm: “Nobody was drinking a beer one hour ago”

This situation involves the utterance of two sentences whose contents (taken in abstraction from any time-specification) do not contradict each other, and yet it qualifies as a disagreement. How is that possible? In the view of these authors, this kind of disagreement is well captured by a Neutralist semantics. In the case of (Beer), adopting time-neutral propositions and postulating circumstances of evaluation that comprise a time parameter allows one to see that Mary's and Sylvia's utterances cannot be both “accurate” (i.e. true) with respect to 4 pm. Hence, we rescue the feeling that Mary and John are in disagreement.

Our view with respect to such an argument is that Neutralism provides no special explanatory advantage about [Beer]: a Specifist could account for the same data. Let us consider King's (2003) analysis, in which tensed sentences can be taken to express classical, *time-specific* propositions. In King's framework, we can explain [Beer] in the following way. The sentences that Mary and John employ respectively are not inconsistent in abstraction from any temporal information. However Mary's utterance expresses the time-specific proposition to the effect *that Mary is drinking a beer at 4 pm*. On the other hand, on the assumption that “one hour ago” is treated as a language-object quantifier, John's utterance expresses the time-specific proposition to the effect *that nobody was drinking a beer one hour prior to 5 pm*. On this account, Mary and John are in disagreement to the extent that, if what Mary says about 4 pm is true, then what John says about an hour earlier than 5 pm (i.e. 4 pm) must be false, and *vice versa*. Neutralism and Specifism end up *on a par*.

2. Specifists on Belief Retention

Richard, in defence of Specifism, argued that Neutralism returns a defective picture of belief retention, for it regards the following inference as valid, while it clearly is not:

[t1] Mary believed that Nixon is President

[t2] Mary still believes everything she once believed

[t3] Mary believes that Nixon is President

The only account that seems to capture the nature of belief retention is, in Richard's view, Specificism. As a response, Rieppel (2011) recently pointed out that one can retain a belief also by entertaining neutral contents. Suppose that Mary believes "Nixon is President" in 1970. Nothing prevents her from retaining the same belief by accepting, in 2011, the *time-neutral* proposition "Nixon was president 41 years ago" which does not contain any reference to 1970. This clearly shows that there is no privilege that Specificism can enjoy with regard to the notion of belief retention. Once again, Neutralism and Specificism end up *on a par*.

3. Disagreement and Belief-retention: an independent characterisation

In this section our aim is that of showing that both disagreement and belief retention could be characterised in terms altogether *independent* from any notion of proposition, be it Specific or Neutral. We will characterise disagreement and belief retention in terms of the accuracy (i.e. the truth of content in a context) of acceptance and rejection of "*semantic bearers*", where a semantic bearer is any entity that may have the property of truth and falsity and that can be the object of the attitudes.

Let us say that, when one accepts a semantic bearer in certain circumstances, one "characterises" a certain state of affairs. "Characterising" a state of affairs *s* means, roughly, making it the case that *s* is what makes a certain acceptance or rejection accurate. So, for example, suppose that I accept the sentence "It is raining" as talking about Seattle, at 12 pm. My acceptance of this sentence "characterises" the state of affairs that it's raining in Seattle at 12 pm, i.e. it makes it the case that the state of affairs of it being raining in Seattle at 12 pm is what makes my acceptance accurate. Having introduced this terminology, we will define disagreement and belief retention in the following way:

[Disagreement]

A and B are in disagreement iff, for two semantic bearers ϕ and ψ , A's acceptance of ϕ characterises a state of affairs *s* such that, if *s* were the case, B's acceptance of ψ would be inaccurate, and *vice-versa*;

[Belief Retention]

A retains his belief iff, for two semantic bearers ϕ and ψ , A's acceptance of ϕ at *t* characterizes the same state of affairs of A's acceptance of ψ at *t'*.

4. A methodological take home message

The foregoing considerations provide a methodological take home message. Since it is possible to provide a completely independent account of disagreement and belief-retention, arguments that intend to show that either Neutralism or Specificism is the right account of propositions by claiming that *only* the former or the latter sheds light on the nature of disagreement or belief retention are unwarranted. In our view, if it ever makes sense to defend Neutralism as opposed to Specificism and *vice versa*, little support is forthcoming from arguments that expect to show that either the first or the second view can afford real, conclusive achievements in our understanding of what disagreement or belief-retention is.