

# A puzzle about belief reports (or why Tanya wouldn't say what she believes)

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## The situation

- (1) Tanya is the secretary of the department I am in. She was told at the last board meeting that a prospective student called Rita would be visiting the following week. I know Rita because we used to live next to each other. I have another friend, Susan, who is not applying to the program, but happens to come by the department to see me the week that Tanya is expecting the prospective student to show up. Susan doesn't know which office is mine so she stops by the secretary's office and asks her where my office is. Tanya forms the belief that that person who came to her office asking for me is the prospective student. Later that same day I run into Tanya and she asks me: *Did Rita find you?* I answer *no*, but later I realize that Tanya was confused about the identity of the person that came to see me. At the end of the day I relate these events to my housemate Delia, who knows both Rita and Susan, and as part of my recounting I tell her (2).
- (2) Tanya thinks that Susan is Rita.

## Two observations

- a. In uttering (2) in the context of (1) I seem to be conveying a truth (and making an informative and felicitous statement).
- b. Given (1), Tanya would not assent to (3):
  - (3) Susan is Rita.

**The puzzle** Normally we can infer from correct belief attribution to belief assent (Berg 1988), but here this inference fails: we cannot infer from the truth of (1) that Tanya would assent to (3).

**The proposal** Things are not normal in (1)–(3). The nature of their abnormality explains why the inference from correct belief attribution to belief assent fails.

## Structure of talk

- i. The Assentialist Principle (TAP)
- ii. Why TAP doesn't hold in (1)–(3)
- iii. Beyond names and identity statements
- iv. Relation to other puzzles

# 1 The Assentialist Principle

- (4) THE ASSENTIALIST PRINCIPLE (TAP)  
“true belief ascriptions are typically directly verifiable by the believer” (Berg 1988:356)

## Supporting evidence

- (5) a. Eve to Line: “Keith thinks that Larry lives South of campus.”  
b. Line to Keith: “Does Larry live South of campus?”

TAP: If Eve spoke truly we expect Keith to answer yes, which accords with intuitions.

- (6) a. Eve to Line: “Keith thinks that The Bears are going to beat Stanford on Saturday.”  
b. Line to Keith: “Are The Bears going to beat Stanford on Saturday?”

TAP: If Eve spoke truly we expect Keith to answer yes, which again accords with intuitions.

- (7) a. Eve to Line: “Keith thinks that roller coasters are fun.”  
b. Line to Keith: “Are roller coasters fun?”

TAP: If Eve spoke truly we expect Keith to answer yes, again in accord with intuitions

- (8) a. Eve to Line: “Keith thinks that string theory is bogus.”  
b. Line to Keith: “Is string theory bogus?”

TAP: If Eve spoke truly we expect Keith to answer yes, in accord with intuitions.

## More generally:

- (9) a. A to B: “C thinks that  $\Phi$ ”  
b. B to C: “ $\Phi$ ?”

TAP says:

- If A spoke truly, C normally answers yes to B’s question.
- This holds whether  $\Phi$  is:
  - a matter of fact, e.g. the location of Larry’s house relative to campus (5)
  - a statement about a contingent future proposition, e.g. the outcome of an upcoming game (6)
  - a matter of personal taste, e.g. the properties of roller coasters (7)
  - a value judgements, e.g. the value of string theory (8)
- $\Phi$  can even be an identity statement involving names, which brings us close to (2)/(11):
  - (10) a. Eve to Line: “Keith thinks that the undergraduate advisors are Larry and Rich.”  
b. Line to Keith: “Are the undergraduate advisors Larry and Rich?”
  - (11) Line to Delia: “Tanya thinks that Susan is Rita.”
- as for attitude reports in general it doesn’t matter whether  $\Phi$  is true or false in the context of utterance
- so what is the difference between (10) and (11)?

## 2 Why TAP fails in (1)–(3)

### Intuitively

- i. Keith would assent to *The undergraduate advisors are Larry and Rich* because he would use *Larry* to refer to Larry and *Rich* to refer to Rich and he holds the (false) belief that those two individuals are the current undergraduate advisors.
- ii. Tanya wouldn't assent to *Rita is Susan* because she would not use *Susan* to refer to the woman who came by the office.
- iii. Between Delia and me, *Susan* is the best term for picking out the individual who came by the office (because it is an epistemically rigid designator for that individual, an IDENTIFIER in the sense of Groenendijk et al. (1996:207))
- iv. For all three of us, *Rita* is the best term for picking out the (relevant) prospective student (it is an identifier for all three of us, though we have different amounts of knowledge about Rita herself).
- v. Therefore, me using *Susan* and *Rita* in my conversation with Delia is the most effective way of reporting this particular false belief of Tanya's.

**Proposal** TAP may be overridden if doing so is necessary to communicate a certain content effectively.

- vi. To test whether the TAP-violating (2) is necessary in the context of (1) we need to consider what else I could have said to Delia to communicate the content of (2).
- vii. Statements that Tanya would assent to (though both are false):
  - (12) The woman that came by today is Rita.
  - (13) The woman that came by today is the prospective student mentioned at the board meeting.
- viii. So I could have said (14) or (15) to Delia and not violated TAP:
  - (14) Tanya thinks that the woman that came by today is Rita.
  - (15) Tanya thinks that the woman that came by today is the prospective student mentioned at the board meeting.
- ix. Would (14) or (15) communicate the same content as (2) in (1)?
- x. That depends on what exactly I told Delia prior to uttering (2), (14), or (15).
- xi. If all I said is (16), the answer is no:
  - (16) You know my old neighbor Rita, right, and also my friend Susan. Well Tanya, the department secretary, thinks that ...
    - a. Susan is Rita.
    - b. the woman that came by today is Rita.
    - c. the woman that came by today is the prospective student.

and we understand why (2) is felicitous: TAP is overridden because doing so is necessary to communicate a certain content.

xii. If I told her (17), the answer seems to be yes:

- (17) My old neighbor Rita has applied to the department and is going to be visiting this week. My friend Susan happened to come by the department today to see me. She asked Tanya where my office was and now Tanya thinks that . . .
- a. Susan is Rita.
  - b. the woman that came by today is Rita.
  - c. the woman that came by today is the prospective student.

so we expect the TAP-violating (17a) to be infelicitous, contrary to fact.

**Observation** Even if (2), (14), and (15) convey the same content in the context of (17), they don't convey it equally effectively. (17a) is a better way of communicating Tanya's false belief to Delia than either (17b) or (17c).

- xiii. (2) is felicitous in (17) because even though there are other ways of communicating the same content, namely (14) and (15), none of these communicate it **as effectively** as (2) does, and hence TAP may be overridden.
- xiv. Why do proper names allow us to communicate more effectively than descriptions?
- xv. They are more DISCRIMINATE (in the sense of Heller 2005):

“when the common ground contains information that allows constructing more than one referring expression for a certain entity, some expressions are preferred to others. In particular, proper names are preferred to headed descriptions with a contentful noun, which are preferred to bleached descriptions, which, in turn are preferred to FRs [Free Relatives; LM]” (Heller 2005:131)

**Upshot** (2) is felicitous in (1), despite violating TAP, because there are no alternatives to (2) that communicate the same content equally effectively.

### 3 Beyond names and identity

If the above proposal is on the right track, legitimate TAP violations should not be restricted to reports of the form in (2). In particular, they needn't involve names or identity statements.

**Question 1** Do legitimate TAP-violations necessarily involve names?

If we change (1) and (17) such that Delia does not know Susan by name, but does know her as my running partner (because Delia has seen Susan come by regularly and Susan and I go off running), it seems that (18) would be felicitous:

(18) Tanya thinks that my running partner is Rita.

(18) would violate TAP since Tanya wouldn't assent to *Line's running partner is Rita*.

**Question 2** Do legitimate TAP-violations necessarily involve identity statements?

In the context of (1), it seems like I could have felicitously uttered the TAP-violating (19), where  $\Phi$  is not an identity statement, or even (20), where  $\Phi$  is not a copular clause:

(19) Tanya thinks that Susan is a prospective student.

(20) Tanya thinks that Susan has applied to the program.

**Conclusion** It seems plausible that the puzzle is not about names or identity statements, but about norms for reporting beliefs and norms for referring to individuals. The two interact when we need to refer to individuals that figure in other people's beliefs.

## 4 Relation to other puzzles

- The puzzle discussed here seems to be the inverse of various puzzles in the philosophical literature, including Kripke's (1979) London/Londres, Crimmins and Perry's (1989) Edward Tudor puzzle, and Mark Richard's phonebooth case.
- In all of those, the puzzle revolves around an agent failing to realize that an individual or entity presented to her on two different occasions is in fact one and the same individual<sup>1</sup>
- In the puzzle discussed here the agent fails to realize that two individuals presented to her on two separate occasions are in fact two different individuals.
- It might be worth seeing whether the proposal made above has anything to offer with respect to these other puzzles.

## References

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<sup>1</sup>Though, it seems to me that one could quibble with this last point in Kripke's London/Londres example.