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# Expressing and Attributing Beliefs

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## I

Despite two hundred years of counter-Cartesian agitation, we are still gripped by a picture of cognition as the traversing of a *boundary* that separates our thought from what it is about. On the one hand, beliefs are all there within the mind. They are essentially *inner* states in that they are (and can be known to be) what they are, independently of how things actually are in the world outside that mind. On the other hand, they are also essentially *cognitive* states. They are *about*, or at least *purport* to be about, the world without the mind—a world that is what it is independently of how it is thought to be. The last vestige of Cartesianism is the idea that essentially cognitive states such as beliefs can also be essentially inner states—in the sense that while their *success* as representations depends on how it is with things that are not such states, their status as the representings they are (as *purporting* to present particular ways external things could be) is independent of everything apart from the states themselves.

In his penetrating and original book *The Nature of Mental Things*, Arthur Collins argues that this last vestige of Cartesianism must be jettisoned, that "...beliefs are not inner states of agents at all..." [165]. Why not? In brief, because

There is no state of belief that the subject might report without asserting that *p*. [167]

Collins' diagnosis is that thinking of beliefs as inner states involves misassembling *expressions* of belief to *reports* of inner states of belief. Beliefs can be expressed implicitly in ordinary assertions; the belief that Kant lived in Königsberg can be expressed by claiming that Kant lived in Königsberg, for instance by asserting the sentence "Kant lived in Königsberg." Beliefs can also be expressed explicitly in self-ascriptions; the belief that Kant lived in Königsberg can be expressed by claiming that one believes Kant lived in Königsberg, for instance by asserting the sentence "I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg."

This latter claim looks like a report on an inner state; yet this way of understanding what is going on involves, Collins argues, a fundamental mistake.

[A]n expression of belief is not a report in which the speaker tells others about himself. [28]

It cannot be, for claiming either that Kant lived in Königsberg or that I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg is taking a stand on the issue of where Kant lived. It is making an assertion: committing myself with respect to this objective matter of fact. This is *doing* something: altering my status with respect to the question of where Kant lived. Collins' claim is that no report of an inner state of mine can have the effect of committing me *vis-à-vis* this outer state of affairs. Expressing a belief involves undertaking a commitment, and no *description* I can give of myself can accomplish that.

Collins' master argument for this claim is that

Belief that *p* cannot be an inner state because such an account would engender incoherent first-person belief statements that fail to express any stand on the belief itself. [169]

If saying what I believe *were* reporting on an inner state, then just as John can describe me as believing that Kant lived in Königsberg without taking a stand on where Kant lived—committing himself only to a description of *me*, one that does not entail anything about Kant—so I would be able to describe myself as believing that Kant lived in Königsberg without taking a stand on where Kant lived—committing myself only to a description of *me*, one that does not entail anything about Kant. But in fact I can do no such thing. My saying that I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg *is* taking a stand on where Kant lived. I cannot say what I believe without undertaking commitments regarding how things are *outside* me; so saying what I believe is not properly understood as the reporting of something *inside* me. The argument turns on two claims. The first is that I cannot *just* say how it is with me with respect to my Kant beliefs, without *also* taking a stand on how it is with Kant; the idea of my giving such a *mere* report on or description of my beliefs is incoherent. The second is that if my expressing a belief *were* reporting on an inner state of mine, there could be no explanation of why I cannot, as others apparently can, take a stand on what is inside of me without thereby taking a stand also on what is outside of me.

This argument cannot be assessed without sorting out the cardinal features of our talk about beliefs. Belief-talk involves both first person *expressions* of belief, such as "I believe that *p*," and third (or second) person *ascriptions* of belief, such as "John believes that *p*." A theory of belief ought to explain all these facts about these two aspects of belief talk:

1) Explicit first person expressions of belief, like third person ascriptions, exhibit a pattern of truth values across possible situations that is different from that of implicit expressions

of belief. That is why we must each admit, in the manner of the paradox of the preface, that *not-p* and “I believe that *p*” might both be true, as well as that *not-p* and “John believes that *p*” might both be true.

2) Ascriptions to others of the belief that *p* do not have the force of assertions of *p*, since one need not endorse a belief in order to attribute it to someone else.

3) Explicit first person expressions of belief, assertions of sentences of the form “I believe that *p*,” have the force or significance of asserting that *p*, committing oneself to that claim, taking a stand on its truth.

4) In spite of the distinction between first person expressions and third person ascriptions of belief, there must be some univocal sense of ‘belief that *p*’ in play in both sorts of belief statement. For in an important sense John and I say the same thing when I assert “I believe that *p*,” and he asserts “Brandom believes that *p*.” Both are entailed by the claim that everyone believes that *p*, and both entail the claim that someone believes that *p*.

It is not easy to reconcile these various claims. The first point assimilates explicit first person expressions of beliefs to third person ascriptions of belief, while distinguishing them from implicit first person expressions of belief. The second and third points assimilate explicit first person expressions of belief to implicit first person expressions of belief, while distinguishing them from third person ascriptions of belief. The fourth point forbids us from accommodating these divergent assimilations by pleading ambiguity or equivocation.

How, then, are we to understand what one is doing by asserting “I believe that *p*”? Collins’ claim is that construing it as a report on an inner state makes it impossible to explain why this performance bears assertional force (point 3). The tradition he opposes, by contrast, focuses on the difference between the way assertions of “I believe that *p*,” and “*S* believes that *p*,” on the one hand, and of *p* itself, on the other, vary in truth value over possible circumstances (point 1). Treating this feature as most revelatory of what one is doing in explicitly expressing a belief is what leads to contrasting “I believe that *p*,” (together with “*S* believes that *p*,”) not only with assertions of *p*, but with explicit factives such as “I know that *p*,” (and “*S* knows that *p*,”). Following this line of thought, one then understands the former as reporting only a narrow or inner state of the believer, and not, as the latter does, a wide state that includes an external component regarding how things are in the world outside the believer. So each camp can point to an undeniable central feature of belief-talk in support of its construal: the tradition insists that only an understanding of explicit expressions of belief as reports of inner states can explain the potential difference in truth value between such expressions and the implicit expressions of those beliefs in straightforward assertions, while Collins insists that no understanding of explicit expressions of beliefs as reports can explain why such expressions necessarily carry assertional force.

## II

It will help to sharpen the account offered thus far of Collins' master argument by considering two related sorts of objections that it might elicit. The first is due to David Finkelstein. We should agree with Collins that expressing a belief is taking a stand on the truth of the content believed (point 3 above), and so that it is impossible for anyone to be entitled to say things of the form: "I believe that  $p$ , but I take no stand on it, in particular don't take it to be true." For the belief explicitly expressed by the first conjunct just *is* a taking-true, the taking of a stand on  $p$ , of the sort denied by the second conjunct. What may be controversial is Collins' further claim that it is a consequence of any account of beliefs as inner states that such a conjunctive report *could* be in order. Things are clearest for physicalistic versions of such theories, so consider a theory that identifies believing that  $p$  with inscribing a tokening that expresses the content  $p$  (in some sort of electrochemical brain-writing) in a special region or fashion—entering it into one's "belief box," as this functional specification is often put. Then the possibility cannot be ruled out that someone could discover what he believes by examining the inscriptions in his belief box, perhaps using a special instrument, a cerebroscope, to detect and decipher them. The worry arises that under such circumstances it might be in order to make just the sort of conjunctive announcement whose incoherence Collins insists on: "I believe that Kant lived in Königsberg (for the cerebroscope reveals the appropriate tokening in my belief box), but I take no stand on where Kant lived: I wouldn't give that answer if asked, and I have no view about the truth of that claim."

Such an argument, Finkelstein points out, would beg the question against the identity theorist. Part of what it means for a particular theory identifying beliefs with brain states to be correct is that the presence of appropriate tokenings in the belief box causes all the usual manifestations of belief: acting and choosing in specific ways, being disposed under appropriate conditions to make certain avowals and endorse certain claims, and in general to take a stand on the issue the belief in question addresses. For a cerebroscope constructed according to the principles of such a theory to be functioning correctly is for it to detect a tokening in the belief box only when those dispositions to manifest the belief are present. In attempting to show that a certain sort of theory is covertly incoherent, one is not permitted simply to assume that it is empirically inadequate—though of course, if it is in fact incoherent, it is bound to be empirically inadequate. Yet without the inadmissible assumption that the presence of the relevant sort of inner state could diverge from the disposition to take a stand on the corresponding issue, what basis is there for the claim that understanding beliefs as inner states "would engender incoherent first-person belief statements that fail to express any stand on the belief itself," as Collins claims?

I believe that this objection is based on a misunderstanding of Collins' argument. In order to distinguish the argument Collins is making from those that are properly liable to Finkelstein's objection, it is useful to consider a second, related objection. As pointed out above, Collins' argument against traditional construals of belief has two parts: that the notion of a certain kind of noncommittal first-person report is incoherent, and that traditional construals at the least cannot explain this incoherence, and at the most are committed to denying it. The objection just considered takes issue with the second premise (according to a certain reading of it); it is possible to take issue instead (or as well) with the first. For instance, one can say of oneself under some description that one believes something, without thereby undertaking a commitment to it: in asserting that

the one who produced the inscription of "Kant lived in Königsberg" that appears on the scrap of paper I found in the library believes that Kant lived in Königsberg,

I am not yet asserting that Kant lived in Königsberg, even if I in fact produced that inscription. I might easily be unaware that I did so, and did so as an exercise without thinking at all about whether the claim it expresses is true. Only if I am obliged to recognize myself as satisfying the description of the believer does this sort of *de facto* first person ascription of a belief carry the committive force of an assertion. A similar phenomenon occurs when the ignorance on the part of the speaker that keeps the belief ascription from having the significance of an assertion has to do with the content of the belief, rather than who the believer is. My great respect for the author of a biography of Kant might lead me sincerely and truthfully to express a belief by saying:

I believe that the first full sentence on page 32 of this book is true.

Even if that sentence says that Kant lived in Königsberg, I have not said that he did, and I may not believe that he did, having no idea what the sentence I have just endorsed says, even though I have in a sense committed myself on the question of where Kant lived.

Perhaps most significantly, in the context of Finkelstein's objection, nonassertive reports of one's own beliefs apparently can result from the same sort of cognitive opacity when it concerns not who is believing, or what is believed, but rather just what state the believer is in. Suppose I say

I am in the same state with respect to the claim that Kant lived in Königsberg that Carlyle was in with respect to the claim that Kant was the author of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*.

Have I asserted that Kant lived in Königsberg? If Carlyle in fact believed that Kant was the author of *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, then I have committed myself as to Kant's residence, just as in the previous case; but I might well take it falsely that Carlyle had no opinion as to the authorship of this work, and

so have meant to convey that I have no opinion as to Kant's residence. On the other hand, if I took it that Carlyle did know what books Kant wrote, but in fact he did not, perhaps I intended by my remark to assert that Kant lived in Königsberg, but failed to do so. It would seem that it is only if I know that the state I am expressing with respect to a claim is belief that my avowal of it has the standard assertional force of first person expressions of belief. But this case is no different in principle from that Finkelstein considers: I could on the basis of my view of my own brain through the cerebroscope report that

there is an inscription to the effect that *p* in my B-box,

without thereby asserting that *p*, even if believing that *p* were (according to Collins) *per impossibile*, having such an inscription in my B-box, so long as I did not *know* that that is what believing that *p* consists in.

Collins would not deny any of this. Though all of these examples are nonassertive self-ascriptions—ascriptions of belief to oneself that fail to express any stand on the truth of the content of the belief—none of them count for him as the sort of reports that are incoherent in principle. To say of someone (who turns out to be oneself) that one is in some state (which turns out to be believing) with respect to a claim (which turns out to have a certain content) need not in general be to *express* a belief in the relevant sense; that one can coherently perform such a saying without assertively taking a stand on the truth of the content of the claim involved does not undercut Collins' incoherence claim about nonassertive expressions of belief. His complaint against traditional theories of belief is not that they leave room for this sort of speech act. But we need to hear more than Collins has told us about what marks off the genuine expressions of belief on which his argument turns.

So I think Collins' claims are best understood as addressed in the first place not to our understanding of the concept of *belief*, but to our understanding of what we are *doing* when we *say* what we believe—namely that we are not reporting or describing ourselves as having or being in states of a certain kind, states that could be what they are regardless of how things are outside the believer. It is not that we are reporting or describing ourselves in some other way; the point is that genuine explicit first person expressions of belief should not be understood as having the grammar of reports or descriptions at all. If beliefs just are what we report or describe ourselves as having in explicit first person expressions of belief, then according to Collins as I understand him there could not be such a thing as belief. This is not to say that belief-talk is itself somehow incoherent or broken-backed, but that philosophers radically and systematically misunderstand such talk.

Collins has taken to heart Wittgenstein's warning that we should not just assume that because some kind of speech act has the surface grammatical

form characteristic of reports or descriptions of things that it ought to be assimilated to this model. One must look at how the expressions are actually used. Collins rejects the assimilation of first person expressions of belief to reports or descriptions—and on this basis, given the univocality claim (point 4 above), also the assimilation of third person ascriptions of belief to reports or descriptions. This is a radical move, and misunderstandings his arguments are liable to result from attempting to construe those arguments in a more traditional framework: taking him to be making an extensional claim, having to do with the things one is reporting or attributing:

If I can attribute (what are in fact) X's to myself without committing myself as to how things stand outside myself, then X's are not beliefs.

Thinking of the point this way naturally evokes objections to the effect that there are many ways to pick out beliefs and attribute them to oneself, only some of which apparently have this assertional significance. Then the view that there is something incoherent about “first-person belief statements that fail to express any stand on the belief itself,” can appear only as the claim that beliefs are a funny kind of thing that can only be described or specified one way. (If I understand him correctly, this is how Searle thinks about them: they are “intrinsically intentional states,” in the sense that any non-intentional specification, any way of picking them out except as beliefs, is not a way of picking *them* out.) By contrast, Collins claim is actually an intensional one, having to do with how belief-attributing talk or concepts work:

If explicit X-attributions to myself do not commit me as to how things stand outside myself, then X-attributions are not explicit *expressions* of belief.

Expressing a belief is not (just) describing oneself, it is (also) describing the outside world. Expression is not explicable as self description since it involves asserting *what* is believed, and not just *that* it is believed. Ascribing a belief is not (just) describing someone, it is (also) holding someone responsible for a stand. The trouble with traditional theories is that they don't make sense of this fundamental notion of taking a stand, committing oneself as to how things are.

I think what Collins shows us is the need for an account of the essentially normative attitudes of a) undertaking or acknowledging doxastic commitments and b) attributing such commitments to others, of c) the essentially social difference in perspective these attitudes incorporate, together with an account of what it is explicitly to express those attitudes by d) speech acts of assertion and e) ascriptions of propositional attitude respectively. Further, we need to understand how the doxastic commitments expressed implicitly in our actions and explicitly in our claims and ascriptions are distinguished from other sorts of commitments by their propositional contentfulness: their an-

swering for their correctness to the way things are independently of those normative statuses and attitudes towards them.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I work out one sort of approach to these issues in detail in *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, forthcoming from Harvard University Press.