

# Propositional Attitudes as Self-Ascriptions\*

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## Abstract

According to Lynne Rudder Baker's Practical Realism, we know that we have beliefs, desires, and other propositional attitudes independent of any scientific investigation. Propositional attitudes are an indispensable part of our everyday conception of the world and not in need of scientific validation. This paper asks what is the nature of the attitudes such that we may know them so well from a commonsense perspective. I argue for a self-ascriptivist view, on which we have propositional attitudes in virtue of ascribing them to ourselves. On this view, propositional attitudes are derived representational states, deriving their contents and their attitude types from our self-ascriptions.

Keywords: propositional attitudes, intentionality, naturalism, commonsense realism, Practical Realism, Lynne Rudder Baker

Much discussion in philosophy of mind and cognitive science in the 1980s and 1990s has centered on the question of realism about the propositional attitudes posited by commonsense psychology. On the one hand, realists like Jerry Fodor (1987) argue that propositional attitudes—states like a belief that grass is green, a desire to eat ice cream, and a hope that global warming does not kill us all—are physically-realized in our brains. On the other hand, instrumentalists

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like Daniel Dennett (1987) take them to be predictively useful posits with no more reality than centers of gravity. Lynne Rudder Baker (1995) offers a refreshingly down-to-earth alternative to both positions: the propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology exist, but they needn't be identified with brain states, states of immaterial souls, or anything else. They are practically indispensable, irreducible, and totally real.

Although I don't entirely agree with all the details of Baker's view, I do agree with one key idea: propositional attitudes form an integral part of our conception of ourselves and the world around us, and this is reason to accept them in some form. In this paper, I propose a "self-ascriptivist" view of the propositional attitudes posited by folk psychology, on which they exist insofar as and because we ascribe them to ourselves. The very features of the attitudes that make us want to accept them—their integral role in our self-conception—is what makes them real.

I proceed as follows: §1 provides some background, §2 considers why the issue of realism about the propositional attitudes posited by folk psychology is particularly challenging, §3 argues for a self-ascriptivist view of occurrent propositional attitudes whose contents go beyond the contents we consciously entertain, and §4 extends this view to standing propositional attitudes.

## 1 Background

*Propositional attitudes* are states such as believing that grass is green, desiring ice cream, and hoping that global warming does not kill us all. They are standardly thought to involve a "content" and an "attitude" component. The *content* of an attitude is what it "says," is "about," is "directed at," or, more generally, *represents*. For example, a belief that grass is green represents that

grass is green. The *attitude* of a propositional attitude is the stance we take towards the content—believing, desiring, hoping, intending, fearing, etc. It is possible for two propositional attitudes to have the same content but different attitudes (e.g., Vera might believe that Santa Claus exists while Eleni desires that Santa Claus exist) and two propositional attitudes might have the same attitude but different contents (e.g., Vera might believe that Santa Claus exists while Eleni believes that Pegasus exists). In this paper, I am concerned with the propositional attitudes that form an integral part of our commonsense conception of ourselves and others—the beliefs and desires we take ourselves and others to have and that we take to explain and predict their behavior—and set aside any propositional attitudes that do not play a role in commonsense psychology, such as inaccessible attitudes, subpersonal attitudes, and conscious attitudes with contents we cannot in any sense articulate. For convenience, I will restrict the use of the term “propositional attitudes” to apply only to the propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology.

Propositional attitudes come in occurrent and standing varieties. *Occurrent* propositional attitudes are propositional attitudes that we count as having while they “occur” to us—a passing thought that grass is green, a sudden realization that you forgot your wallet at home, a prolonged rumination on the reality of climate change. In contrast, *standing* propositional attitudes are propositional attitudes that we count as having even while they do not “occur” to us, such as a belief that the Acropolis is in Athens that you have even while you are not thinking it, a desire to invite your friend over for dinner that you count as having even when you are not thinking about your friend or dinner, and an intention to get some ice cream after work that you are not constantly running through your mind throughout the work day.

A few notes: First, as I am using the term, propositional attitudes are

“cognitive” as opposed to perceptual or other sensory states. This, of course, is not to deny that commonsense psychology posits perceptual or other sensory states nor that such states represent.<sup>1</sup> Second, as I am using the term, propositional attitudes include attitudes that might end up not having propositional contents, such as a desire for ice cream or a love of Santa Claus.<sup>2</sup> Third, I am using the notion of content loosely such that all representational states—states that consist in the representing of a content—need not form a natural kind.

## 2 The Trouble with Propositional Attitudes

It has sometimes been thought that there is a live question as to whether propositional attitudes are real: propositional attitudes are part of our folk or commonsense conception of ourselves and the world. But this conception might be mistaken and so its posits might not exist. It is for this reason that much discussion on the attitudes assumed that realism about propositional attitudes requires that commonsense psychology be vindicated by more rigorous scientific investigation (see especially Fodor 1987)—and it is precisely this assumption that Baker rejects.

One might suggest that propositional attitudes are not *mere* posits of commonsense psychology. We are also introspectively acquainted with them: we can tell just by introspection that we have certain beliefs, desires, and other such states. If so, realism about propositional attitudes would not require any scientific vindication. Compare: We are introspectively acquainted with consciousness, so realism about consciousness needs no scientific vindication. Considering the

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<sup>1</sup>Indeed, in Mendelovici 2018a, appendix D, I argue that the account of propositional attitudes I offer here can be extended to perception and in Mendelovici 2013b and Mendelovici 2013a I argue for a representationalist view of moods and emotions.

<sup>2</sup>Whether there are such non-propositional attitudes is a matter of contention, but this does not affect my main points. See Grzankowski and Montague 2018 for a collection of papers on the topic and Mendelovici 2018b for my favored way of construing the debate.

analogous suggestion that realism about propositional attitudes can likewise be supported will not only help us see why realism about propositional attitudes is reasonably thought to depend on scientific vindication but also help us get clear on the kinds of contents propositional attitudes are thought to have, which will give us a clearer idea of what exactly realism about propositional attitudes involves.

The problem with the suggestion that we are introspectively acquainted with propositional attitudes is that, while I agree that we are acquainted with *something*, what we are acquainted with does not answer to the commonsense psychological notion of a propositional attitude. For one, we are not introspectively acquainted with standing propositional attitudes—the mental states we are acquainted with are all occurrent. But even the occurrent states we are acquainted with do not answer to the commonsense notion of a propositional attitude. The clearest way to see this is to consider the contents that we are introspectively acquainted with in having an occurrent state. For example, suppose you consciously and occurrently believe that the mental supervenes on the physical. In this case, you are arguably acquainted with something. This something might answer to the notion of content in that it’s the “saying” or representing of something.<sup>3</sup> It might include some perceptual or verbal imagery or even a gisty or partial grasp of the notions involved in your belief, like that of supervenience. Let us call this content that you are introspectively acquainted with, whatever it is, your *immediate content*. The problem is that your immediate content does not include the full content of the propositional attitude that is posited by commonsense psychology. For instance, it does not include your full understanding of supervenience, though it might include some gisty or partial understanding of the notion. Still, when I try to predict your behavior

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<sup>3</sup>For an argument for this claim, see Mendelovici 2018a, §7.2.1.

(say, which questions you will ask at the talk on dualism), I attribute to you a belief with the full understanding, and when I assess your beliefs as rational or not, I hold you accountable for a belief with the full understanding. If this is right, then commonsense psychology at least sometimes posits *rich descriptive contents*—e.g., your full understanding of supervenience, which might consist in a definition or other characterization of supervenience—that outrun the immediate contents we are introspectively acquainted with.

There is a second way in which the contents posited by commonsense psychology outrun our immediate contents. Some of the contents of the attitudes posited by commonsense psychology are *object-involving contents*, contents that involve particular objects. But we arguably are not introspectively aware of such objects.<sup>4</sup> For example, you might take me to believe that George is a bachelor, where George himself—the flesh-and-blood person—is supposed to be a constituent of my belief’s content. Since, arguably, George is not part of whatever content I’m introspectively acquainted with, this is another way in which the contents of the propositional attitudes posited by commonsense psychology go beyond our immediate contents.

If we also assume—plausibly, I think—that immediate contents are *narrow*, in that which contents we are immediately aware of depends on our intrinsic properties, then there is a third way in which the contents of commonsense psychological propositional attitudes go beyond our immediate contents. Thought experiments such as those of Putnam (1975) and Burge (1986) are taken to be intuitively forceful, which suggests that our commonsense psychological content attributions are *broad* in that they are not narrow. If so, then they are not our immediate contents.

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<sup>4</sup>This is a contentious claim, which I have argued for elsewhere (Mendelovici 2018a). Note that this claim is compatible with the claim that we are introspectively acquainted with contents with a singular *form* (Mendelovici 2018b).

If all this is right, then introspection does not provide independent access to the propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology. This makes it reasonable to assume that realism about the attitudes requires scientific vindication. From this, we can also get a better idea of what realism about the attitudes requires: we must, at a minimum, capture the rich descriptive, object-involving, and broad contents that commonsense psychology ascribes.

Elsewhere, I have proposed an account of immediate contents in terms of phenomenal intentionality (Mendelovici 2018a, §7.2.4, 2019). On this account, our immediate contents are *phenomenal contents*, contents the representation of which is nothing over and above the having of certain phenomenal states. For example, the immediate content of a thought about George might include some perceptual imagery, which is nothing over and above certain perceptual phenomenal states. Similarly, the immediate content of a thought about supervenience might include a gisty or partial grasp of a definition of supervenience, which might be nothing over and above certain cognitive phenomenal states.<sup>5</sup>

For present purposes, however, we needn't endorse the account of immediate contents in terms of phenomenal intentionality. Our concern is not with immediate contents but with the contents of the propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology, which, as we've seen, go beyond our immediate contents. In what follows, I will offer an account of propositional attitudes in terms of dispositions to entertain immediate contents. Immediate contents will play a role in this account, but how we ultimately account for them is left open.

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<sup>5</sup>While I do accept that there is such thing as cognitive phenomenology, phenomenology that outruns any sensory phenomenology, this is not strictly speaking required by the view that immediate contents are phenomenally represented (see Mendelovici 2018a, §7.2.4).

### 3 Self-Ascriptivism about Occurrent Propositional Attitudes

So far, we have seen that propositional attitudes are posited by commonsense psychology and that we are not introspectively acquainted with them (though we are introspectively acquainted with some contentful states—those of having certain immediate contents). The fact that we are not introspectively acquainted with the attitudes suggests that it is reasonable to think that realism about the attitudes must be vindicated by science. Baker staunchly denies this claim, arguing that propositional attitudes need no scientific vindication—their practical utility is vindication enough. Baker’s realism about propositional attitudes stems from a larger metaphysical perspective, which she calls “Practical Realism” (1995, 2001, 2007a). According to Practical Realism, our everyday practices provide knowledge of the world around us, allowing us to infer the real existence of items that are usefully assumed to be real by commonsense. Baker writes: “[T]here is no better mark of reality than the utility, reliability, and indispensability of the commonsense conception.” (1995, p. 228) Practical Realism finds application in the case of the propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology. Not only do the attitudes play a role in our psychological explanations of cognition and behavior but, further, they permeate our entire understanding of much of the commonsense world. Baker writes:

The attitudes are woven into the fabric of all social, legal, political, and other institutions. Nothing would be a contract or an invitation to dinner or an election or a death sentence in the absence of beliefs, desires, and intentions. Without attribution of propositional attitudes, there would be no justifying, excusing, praising, or blaming

one another. (Baker 1995, 4–5, footnote suppressed)<sup>6</sup>

While I do not endorse Baker’s Practical Realism wholesale,<sup>7</sup> I do agree that propositional attitudes form part of an integral conception of ourselves as thinking, reasoning, and epistemically assessable persons and that this gives us reason to accept their existence. The reason propositional attitude realism can be defended in this way, I want to suggest, stems from the very nature of the attitudes: they are self-ascriptions.

On the view I will propose, ascribing contents to our immediate contents, our internal states, or ourselves as persons is necessary and sufficient for the aforementioned items to derivatively represent those contents—where *derived representation* is representation that is at least partially constituted, grounded in, or identical to other instances of representation—and the propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology are nothing over and above such self-ascriptions.<sup>8</sup>

We can divide the overall view as it applies to occurrent propositional attitudes into two claims: The first is that our immediate contents, internal states, or selves at least sometimes derivatively represent some contents. The second is that at least some of these derivatively represented contents are, ground, or constitute the occurrent propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology. I argue for the first claim in the next subsection and the second claim in the two subsections that follow. Section 4 turns to standing propositional attitudes.

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<sup>6</sup>Baker follows up on this theme in later work on the metaphysics of everyday objects. In her 2006 paper “Everyday Concepts as a Guide to Reality,” she identifies a class of everyday objects that are “intention-dependent,” dependent on commonsense psychological states.

<sup>7</sup>Even if we take useful commonsense views as a starting point in inquiry, if the usefulness and causal origins of many commonsense beliefs can be explained without assuming the truth of those beliefs, this debunks our reasons for holding them.

<sup>8</sup>I present such a self-ascriptivist view of occurrent and standing state contents in more detail in Mendelovici 2018a, chapters 7–8, and 2019.

### 3.1 Derived Mental Representation

Here is a sketch of an argument for the first claim, the claim that our immediate contents or other internal items at least sometimes derivatively represent some contents:

1. Ascribing a content to something is metaphysically sufficient for that thing to derivatively represent that content.
2. We at least sometimes ascribe a content to our immediate contents, internal states, or selves.
3. Therefore, our immediate contents, internal states, or selves at least sometimes derivatively represent some contents.

Premise (1) is supported by paradigm cases of derived representation, such as those of stop signs and words. A stop sign means <stop!> because we in some sense stipulate, endorse, or accept that it does. Likewise, the word “dog” means <dog> because we stipulate, endorse, or accept that it does. In short, we might say that in these cases, a vehicle of derived representation (a stop sign or a word) gets its derived content from our *ascriptions*, which include tacit or explicit stipulations, endorsements, acceptances, and so on. If this is right, then ascribing a content to a vehicle of representation is metaphysically sufficient for that vehicle to derivatively represent. More precisely, the following claim is true:

(Ascriptivism) Necessarily, if S ascribes content C to O, O derivatively represents C (for S).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>I also think that ascribing a content is *metaphysically necessary* for derived representation—it is not possible for a vehicle to derivatively represent a content in the absence of such ascriptions. If so, then accounts of derived representation that do not appeal to ascriptions fail to deliver metaphysically sufficient conditions for derived representation. See Mendelovici 2018a, §8.2, for related arguments against views of non-phenomenal intentionality in terms of derived representation.

In some cases, our ascriptions are what we might call *direct*: they ascribe a content that is contained within the ascription itself. For example, I might stipulate that the pen that I'm holding stands for the proposition that grass is green. But in other cases, our ascriptions are *indirect*: they ascribe a content that is not contained within the ascription itself, e.g., by deferring to experts, the community, or even the world to specify which content is ascribed. For example, I might stipulate that the pen that I'm holding stands for the tallest person within 20km of me, whoever it turns out to be, or that my word "arthritis" means whatever the experts mean by "arthritis."<sup>10</sup> In these cases, I have succeeded in ascribing a content to my pen or to the word "arthritis", but I have not entertained that content myself.

Premise (2) states that we at least sometimes ascribe a content to our immediate contents, internal states, or selves—in short, we at least sometimes *self-ascribe* contents. There are various ways in which we might do this. Here, I will describe one way, which I take to be fairly undemanding. A key notion in my account is that of a *cashing out thought*, a thought (or other representational state) that specifies that a content is at least partly elucidated by, unpacked into, precisified as, expanded into, or more generally, *cached out* into another content. For example, suppose you think to yourself that George is a bachelor. Suppose you then ask yourself what you mean by <bachelor>. You might have a cashing out thought with the content <by <bachelor>, I mean <unmarried man>>. This thought specifies that one content, <bachelor>, caches out into another content, <unmarried man>. Note that I could have also broken this thought up into two separate cashing out thoughts, each partially specifying what I take <bachelor> to cash out into, e.g., <part of what I mean by <bachelor> is something satisfying <unmarried> and <the only other part of what I mean by

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<sup>10</sup>I am alluding here to Burge's (1979) well-known thought experiment.

<bachelor> is something satisfying <man>>.

Having such cashing out thoughts is one way to ascribe a content to another content. For example, by thinking <by <bachelor>, I mean <unmarried man>>, I thereby ascribe the content <unmarried man> to <bachelor>. But, I want to suggest, merely being *disposed* to have cashing out thoughts after sufficient reflection is enough for ascription. Even if I never actually have a cashing out thought specifying that <bachelor> cashes out into <unmarried man>, the mere fact that I am disposed to have this cashing out thought (after sufficient reflection) is enough for me to count as ascribing <unmarried man> to <bachelor>. If all this is right, then being disposed to have cashing out thoughts is another way in which we can self-ascribe contents, one that is less demanding than actually having cashing out thoughts.

Do we have the relevant dispositions? I want to suggest that we do. When we think, for instance, <the mental supervenes on the physical>, we might not entertain the full definition of supervenience, but we are disposed to produce such a definition if needed. In effect, thought is “symbolic” in that we often use one mental item—in this case, a content—to stand for another. We don’t always entertain our fully cashed out contents—that might be too inefficient or even psychologically impossible given our cognitive limitations—but we do the next best thing: we use other contents as mental “tags” for these fully cashed out contents. This is good enough for many purposes. And when we need to access the fully cashed out content, we can.<sup>11</sup>

This picture allows for both direct and indirect self-ascriptions. The content <by <bachelor>, I mean <unmarried man>> contains the very content it ascribes to <bachelor>: <unmarried man>. In contrast, the content <by

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<sup>11</sup>For other variants of the view that concepts have both “thicker” and “thinner” contents, see Barsalou 1993, 1999, Prinz 2002, Wickelgren 1979, 1992, Hebb 1949, Eliasmith 2013, and Viger 2007. See Mendelovici 2018a, §7.2.3, for discussion.

<bachelor>, I mean an unmarried man> does not contain the content it ascribes. The content, instead, is the referent of the content <unmarried man>—the kind or property of being an unmarried man itself. In both cases, we have a cashing out thought that specifies that some content, C, cashes out into some further content, C+. The difference between the two cases is that in that of direct self-ascription, the content that picks out C+ is or includes C+ itself—the content is *mentioned* in the cashing out thought itself. In the case of indirect self-ascription, the content that picks out C+ is some further content, D, that refers to C+. This is precisely analogous to direct and indirect ascriptions of contents to vehicles in the non-mental case.<sup>12</sup>

Which contents we self-ascribe might be indeterminate. This is because what counts as sufficient reflection has been left unspecified, leaving the conditions of manifestation of the relevant dispositions underspecified. In different circumstances, we might have different cashing out thoughts. For example, in some circumstances, we might have cashing out thoughts that specify that <bachelor> cashes out into <unmarried man>, whereas in other circumstances, we might have cashing out thoughts that specify that <bachelor> cashes out into <man available for marriage>. In some circumstances we might have cashing out thoughts yielding direct self-ascriptions, while in others we have cashing out thoughts yielding indirect self-ascriptions. As a result, there is some indeterminacy in which contents we derivatively represent and, further, in which occurrent propositional attitudes we count as having. This indeterminacy, I want to suggest, is a feature, not a bug. Which precise occurrent propositional attitudes we count as having is indeterminate. For example, it might be indeterminate whether in thinking <George is a bachelor> I am thinking that George belongs

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<sup>12</sup>Of course, the story about indirect self-ascription presupposes an account of reference, which I have not here provided. See Mendelovici 2018a, §9.3.4 and appendix H, and Mendelovici MS for an account congenial to the self-ascriptivist picture.

to a class that excludes popes, 17-year-old boys, or other items that might be classified as bachelors on some cashings out but not others.

One might wonder how exactly cashing out thoughts themselves get their contents. (One might also wonder whether cashing out thoughts have a particular attitude component and how we can account for it, a question I will return to in the next subsection.) Recall that my eventual aim is to provide an account of the propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology in terms of self-ascriptions such as the ones described here. But then, on pain of circularity, cashing out thoughts cannot merely be such propositional attitudes and the contents in virtue of which they play their self-ascriptive roles cannot just be the contents of such attitudes. I want to suggest, instead, that the contents of cashing out thoughts in virtue of which they play their self-ascriptive roles are immediate contents. On this suggestion, for example, the content <by <bachelor>, I mean <unmarried man>> is immediately represented.<sup>13</sup> This requires that contents like <unmarried man> can be immediately represented. More generally, what we can directly and indirectly self-ascribe depends on what we can immediately represent: we can directly self-ascribe only contents that we can immediately represent and we can indirectly self-ascribe only contents that are the referents of contents we can immediately represent. How constraining this is depends on which contents we think we can immediately represent and our favored theory of reference. If we think we can only immediately represent perceptual or sensory contents, then we get a kind of empiricism about derived content on which we can only derivatively represent contents constructed out of perceptual or sensory contents and their referents.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>These immediate contents will have to involve ways of mentioning rather than using contents, since both <bachelor> and <unmmarried man> are mentioned rather than used in this construction. This might be a matter of inner demonstrations of contents that we are acquainted with, a special kind of attention to such contents, or the embedding of such contents into higher-order thoughts.

<sup>14</sup>If we can perceptually represent the relation of causation, this empiricist view ends up

I have argued for premise (2) by arguing that we at least sometimes self-ascribe contents to our immediate contents. Combined with premise (1), the claim that such ascriptions are metaphysically sufficient for derived representation, we obtain our conclusion, that there are mental cases of derived representation. When we self-ascribe contents—e.g., by being disposed to have cashing out thoughts specifying that one immediately represented content cashes out into another content—we thereby derivatively represent the self-ascribed content.<sup>15</sup>

In the previous section, I considered the view that immediate contents are phenomenal contents. If we combine self-ascriptivism with this phenomenal intentionality theoretic account of immediate contents, we arrive at a view compatible with the *phenomenal intentionality theory*, the view that all intentionality is phenomenal intentionality or derived from phenomenal intentionality.<sup>16</sup> However, again, as far as the purpose of this paper is concerned, the phenomenal intentionality theoretic account of immediate contents is an optional extra.

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being quite powerful, allowing us to derivatively represent the referents of descriptive contents like <the cause of THIS experience>. Even if we do not perceptually represent causation, the view can also be quite powerful if combined with a causal theory of reference, allowing us to derivatively represent the external-world causes of states of representing particular immediate contents. This latter approach is not one that I endorse, however.

<sup>15</sup>Is derived mental representation the same kind of thing as the having of immediate contents? I don't think so, though both answer to the vague notion of "targeting a content." One difference between them is that derived representation is always relative to an ascriber. Just as stop signs represent <stop!> *for us* and not for cats or in and of themselves, your immediate contents derivatively represent their derived contents *for you* and not for someone else or in and of themselves. Another difference between immediate and derived representation is that it can be indeterminate what we derivatively represent but it cannot be indeterminate what we immediately represent. See Mendelovici 2018a, §7.4, for discussion.

<sup>16</sup>Advocates of the view include Searle (1990, 1992), Strawson (1994, 2008), Pitt (1999, 2004), Horgan and Tienson (2002), Loar (2003), Kriegel (2003, 2007, 2011), Farkas (2008a, 2008b), Horgan and Graham (2009), Chalmers (2010), Pautz (2010), Montague (2010), Bourget (2010, 2017b, 2018), and Mendelovici (2010, 2018a). See Kriegel 2013, Mendelovici and Bourget 2014, and Bourget and Mendelovici 2016 for overviews of the view.

### 3.2 Self-Ascribing the Contents of Occurrent Propositional Attitudes

So far, I have argued that many of our immediate thought contents derivatively represent further contents, which we ascribe to them thanks to our dispositions to have cashing out thoughts. In this and the next subsection, I want to suggest that these self-ascribed contents capture our occurrent propositional attitudes. In this subsection, I argue that these self-ascribed contents include many of the contents we ascribe to occurrent propositional attitudes, including rich descriptive, object-involving, and broad contents. In the next subsection, I show how we can extend this picture to capture the attitude component of occurrent propositional attitudes.

One way in which the self-ascriptivist picture allows us to derivatively represent rich descriptive contents is by direct self-ascription. The example of being disposed to have a cashing out thought specifying that <bachelor> cashes out into <unmarried man> is an example of such direct self-ascription. We might likewise be disposed to have cashing out thoughts specifying that <supervenience> cashes out into some definition of supervenience, that <bird> cashes out into some characterization of birds, or that <George> cashes out into some uniquely identifying description of the flesh-and-blood George. As these examples illustrate, the relevant rich descriptive contents are not limited to definitions, understood as specifications of metaphysically necessary and sufficient conditions for concept application, but can also include categorizations that are not intended to fix reference (such as a characterization of birds in terms of their prototypical features) and mere reference-fixing descriptions (such as descriptions that fix reference to an item via its contingent features). Which of these rich descriptive contents we derivatively represent depends on precisely

which cashing out thoughts we are disposed to have.

We can also derivatively represent rich descriptive contents using indirect self-ascriptions. For example, I might be disposed to have a cashing out thought with the content  $\langle$ by  $\langle$ plus $\rangle$  I mean whatever mathematicians mean by the word “plus” $\rangle$ . Suppose that what mathematicians mean by “plus” is a rich descriptive content. Then,  $\langle$ plus $\rangle$  derivatively represents that rich descriptive content.

One important way in which we derivatively represent object-involving contents is by indirect self-ascription. For example, I might be disposed to have a cashing out thought with the content  $\langle$ by  $\langle$ Eleni $\rangle$ , I mean my first child $\rangle$ . Since the content  $\langle$ my first child $\rangle$  is used rather than mentioned, it has its usual referent, which, presumably, is Eleni herself. I thereby derivatively represent the object-involving content that is Eleni herself. In the same way, we can derivatively represent object-involving contents involving kinds, properties, states of affairs, and other worldly items.

The only way we can derivatively represent object-involving contents that we cannot immediately represent is through indirect self-ascription, along the lines described in the previous paragraph. But if there are object-involving contents that we *can* immediately represent, then we can also derivatively represent them through direct self-ascription. For example, on some views, our immediate contents include abstract properties, like *blueness* and *roundness*.<sup>17</sup> On such views, we can derivatively represent object-involving contents involving these abstract properties by directly ascribing them to some other immediate contents. More plausibly (in my opinion, at least), we might be able to represent our own conscious states, our selves, or the present time or location with object-involving contents that include these items themselves as components. If so, then these

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<sup>17</sup>For views of this sort, see Byrne 2001, Pautz 2007, and Bourget 2017a, 2019, forthcoming. This is a view that I reject, however (see Mendelovici 2018a, chapter 9).

contents are object-involving contents that can be derivatively represented using direct self-ascriptions.

Let us now turn to broad contents, contents that are not entirely determined by the intrinsic properties of subjects. There are two ways in which we can derivatively represent broad contents. First, we might have self-ascriptions that are determined by our intrinsic properties but that self-ascribe different contents depending on environmental factors. For example, chemically-ignorant Oscar and his Twin Earth intrinsic duplicate, Toscar, might both be disposed to have a cashing out thought with the content  $\langle$ by  $\langle$ water $\rangle$ , I mean the clear, liquid, potable stuff found in rivers, streams, seas and oceans around the location of this thought $\rangle$ . What Oscar and Toscar derivatively represent depends on what plays the water role in their respective environments. In Oscar's environment, it's  $H_2O$ , while in Toscar's environment it's some other substance, XYZ. So, Oscar and Toscar's water-related thoughts represent different derived contents—they are broad.<sup>18</sup>

What we derivatively represent can also be sensitive to environmental factors if which dispositions we count as having depends on our environment. Suppose that Oscar and Toscar are intrinsic duplicates who live in 2020 and are both disposed to Google “water” before having a cashing out thought specifying what they mean by their immediate content  $\langle$ water $\rangle$ . Suppose further that, due to the different results they would get upon Googling “water,” Oscar and Toscar are thereby disposed to have different cashing out thoughts upon sufficient reflection: Oscar is disposed to have a cashing out thought with the content  $\langle$ by  $\langle$ water $\rangle$ , I mean  $\langle H_2O \rangle \rangle$ , while Toscar is disposed to have a cashing out thought with the content  $\langle$ by  $\langle$ water $\rangle$ , I mean  $\langle XYZ \rangle \rangle$ . Since what Oscar's and Toscar's water-related immediate contents derivatively represent

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<sup>18</sup>This is, of course, a variant of Putnam's (1975) well-known Twin Earth thought experiment.

partly depends on their environment, these contents are broad. Interestingly, this example shows that not all broad contents need be object-involving or obtained via indirect self-ascriptions.

I have shown how we can derivatively represent rich descriptive, object-involving, and broad contents, which are some of the contents of the propositional attitudes of commonsense psychology. Of course, which particular contents of these sorts we represent depends on which dispositions to have cashing out thoughts we have. If we do not have dispositions to have cashing out thoughts ascribing, say, object-involving contents, then we do not derivatively represent those contents. This leads to the worry that perhaps we do not in fact have the dispositions required to derivatively represent the contents of the propositional attitudes ascribed by commonsense psychology. In response, I want to suggest that the very fact that we intuitively think that propositional attitudes represent rich descriptive, object-involving, and broad contents is reason to think that we derivatively represent those contents. To make this point more precisely, let us distinguish between two different kinds of intuitions about which contents we represent: *first-order intuitions*, which are intuitions about particular actual or merely possible cases (e.g., about the case of Oscar and Toscar), and *theoretical intuitions*, which are intuitions about which theories of content determination are correct (e.g., a theoretical intuition that all content is narrow). I want to suggest that first-order intuitions largely stem from the same source as our dispositions to have cashing out thoughts. These intuitions are intuitions about what we represent in particular cases, intuitions that we obtain from imagining those cases from a first-person perspective or that at least are congruent with those that we would have upon imagining them from a first-person perspective. It is plausible that when we imagine cases from the first-person perspective, we manifest our dispositions to have cashing out thoughts, the very dispositions

that make these first-order intuitions true. In contrast, our theoretical intuitions might be driven by other factors. However, insofar as commonsense psychology respects our first-order intuitions, there is reason to think that the contents we derivatively represent align with the contents it ascribes.<sup>19</sup>

This line of response is very much in line with a theme in Baker’s writing: Baker insists that we should take seriously what she calls the “first-person perspective” (1998, 2007b, 2013), which she describes as “a perspective from which one thinks of oneself as an individual facing the world, as a subject distinct from everything else” (1998, p. 328, footnote suppressed) and “the perspective from which one thinks of oneself *as oneself\**” (2007b, p. 203, emphasis in original), i.e., “without the aid of any third-person name, description, demonstrative or other referential device.” (2007b, p. 203) While, for Baker, any sentient creature has a first-person perspective in the weak sense of having perspectival experiences “with itself as the center” (1998, p. 332), only a self-conscious being has a first-person perspective in the stronger sense of being “able to think of herself as herself\*, and of her thoughts as her own\*.” (1998, p. 332) For Baker, the first-person perspective is a crucial part of our understanding of the world, and any naturalistic outlook ought to take it seriously.

### 3.3 Self-Ascribing the Attitudes of Occurrent Propositional Attitudes

So far, I have argued that we derivatively represent the contents of many of the occurrent propositional attitudes posited by commonsense psychology. But I have not yet said anything about the attitude component of occurrent propositional attitudes, about what makes an occurrent belief a *belief* and an occurrent desire a *desire*.

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<sup>19</sup>See also Mendelovici 2018a, §7.3.3, especially fn. 37.

There are various views of attitudes: On one view, *attitude functionalism*, a propositional attitude's attitude is nothing over and above its functional role (Fodor 1987). On another view, *attitude phenomenalism*, a propositional attitude's attitude is nothing over and above its phenomenal properties (Jorba 2016). On a third view, *attitude representationalism*, a propositional attitude's attitude is nothing over and above its (derived or underived) representational features (Pearce 2016, Mendelovici 2018a, appendix E, Montague MS).

My favored view is attitude representationalism. According to one way of fleshing out the view, different types of attitudes have characteristic contents in addition to the contents we normally attribute to them. For example, a belief that it is raining might simply be a representational state with the content <it is true that it is raining> or <it is a fact that it is raining>. This state includes both the “that-clause” content <it is raining> as well as a further content characteristic of belief stating that the that-clause content is true or is a fact. Similarly, a desire that it rain might be a representational state with the content <it is good that it is raining>.<sup>20</sup>

One reason to favor attitude representationalism offered by Pearce (2016, chapter 3) is that it best explains the explanatory and rational roles of attitudes. For example, consider the following example of a belief-desire pair and a belief-belief pair, which is modified from Pearce 2016, p. 8:

- (BD) Sue desires that she get the job.  
Sue believes that if she bribes the recruiter then she will get the job.
- (BB) Sue believes that she will get the job.  
Sue believes that if she bribes the recruiter then she will get the job.

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<sup>20</sup>One challenge for attitude representationalism is that of distinguishing between desires and beliefs that something is good. One way to distinguish the two is to say that they strictly speaking have different contents. For example, Pearce (2016) suggests that desires but not beliefs represent things as “rewarding,” where rewardingness is a content special to desires.

Suppose Sue bribes the recruiter. The belief-desire pair in (BD), but not the belief-belief pair in (BB), would explain and rationalize Sue's behavior. Why is this? Attitude functionalism cannot explain this: since it takes a propositional attitude's attitude to be nothing over and above its functional role, it can't then explain a propositional attitude's functional role in terms of its attitude. As Pearce puts it, attitude representationalism gets the order of explanation backwards: we want to say that it is *because* of a propositional attitude's attitude that it plays the roles that it does, not vice versa.

Consider now a version of attitude phenomenalism that is not also a version of attitude representationalism, a view that takes attitudes to be a matter of phenomenal characters that are not also representational contents—i.e., that are “mere” qualia. Such a view also cannot make sense of why the belief-desire pair and not the belief-belief pair explain and rationalize Sue's behavior. On such a view, the difference between Sue's having a belief that she will get the job and her having a desire that she get the job is merely phenomenal—the two states feel a different way. But it is not clear why such a feeling should cause or rationalize Sue's bribing the recruiter in the belief-desire case but not in the belief-belief case.

Attitude representationalism, in contrast, can make good sense of why the belief-desire pair but not the belief-belief pair explain and rationalize Sue's behavior. Sue's having a desire to get the job is a matter of her representing a content like <my getting the job is good>, while Sue's having a belief that she will get the job is a matter of her representing a content like <it is a fact that I will get the job>. Sue's belief that if she bribes the recruiter she will get the job has a content like <it is a fact that if I bribe the recruiter, I will get the job>. From the belief-desire pair, but not from the belief-belief pair, Sue can conclude that bribing the recruiter is good, which explains and rationalizes her behavior.

Are characteristic attitude contents immediately or derivatively represented? I want to suggest that at least in the case of occurrent propositional attitudes, attitudes involve characteristic immediate contents. One reason to think this is that we can at least roughly identify which attitudes we have based on introspection of our present states. This immediate content plausibly distinguishes between broad categories of attitudes like belief-like attitudes (e.g., accepting, assuming, being certain of), desire-like attitudes (e.g., wanting, wishing, hoping), and intention-like attitudes (e.g., deciding, stipulating, intending). But I also want to suggest that the relevant characteristic contents might additionally have a derived component that fleshes out the rough immediate content, determining a more fine-grained attitude type within these broad categories. This allows us to capture fine-grained attitudes such as hoping, wishing, aspiring, regretting, loving, adoring, and being ashamed of.

If this is right, then the fine-grain attitudes of occurrent propositional attitudes are self-ascribed, just like their contents. On the overall view, then, occurrent propositional attitudes have immediate contents, which might fix some of the contents we want to ascribe to them as well as their coarse-grained attitude type, but their fully specified contents and fine-grained attitude types are fixed by their derived contents.

Before continuing, let us briefly return to the question of how to account for the attitudes involved in cashing out thoughts themselves. In order for cashing out thoughts to successfully self-ascribe contents, there is no specific attitude that they must have—any broadly belief-like or intention-like attitude will do the trick. Compare: We can make a pen derivatively represent the Pacific Ocean by believing, accepting, intending, stipulating, or deciding that it does—more than one kind of fine-grained attitude type can play the relevant ascriptive role. So cashing out thoughts arguably play their self-ascriptive role thanks to their

immediate contents and independently of any derived contents they might have. This is fortunate, since it allows us to avoid any circularity that we would face if their self-ascriptive role depended on their derived contents.

## 4 Self-Ascriptivism about Standing Propositional Attitudes

So far, my focus has been on occurrent propositional attitudes. I now briefly turn to standing propositional attitudes, propositional attitudes we count as having even while they are not “occurring” in us. I want to suggest that the self-ascriptivist account can extend to these propositional attitudes.

One way to extend the account is to simply say that standing propositional attitudes are dispositions to have occurrent propositional attitudes with the same immediate and derived contents. But another way is to take standing propositional attitudes to themselves be self-ascribed. The basic idea is that while we might be disposed to have various occurrent states, we in some sense own up to or take as genuinely ours only some of them. *These* are our standing propositional attitudes. For example, suppose I am disposed to have various intrusive occurrent desires like that I drive off the road. However, I do not have an underlying disposition to accept these desires as forming part of my overall set of desires, as being genuinely mine. So, they do not count as part of my set of standing desires. The difference between these states and the desires I actually count as having is that I self-ascribe the latter but not the former.

On the view I want to propose, we count as having various standing propositional attitudes because we self-ascribe and hence derivatively represent them. The view faces a complication, which it is helpful to consider at the outset: In the case of occurrent propositional attitudes, we ascribe contents to our immediate

contents—our immediate contents serve as the “vehicles” of derived mental representation. This is in line with paradigm cases of derived representation in which a vehicle of derived representation—a word, stop sign, or symbol—is ascribed a meaning. But in the case of standing propositional attitudes, there is no clear candidate for a vehicle of derived representation. Standing states do not come with corresponding immediate contents or other mental items available to serve as vehicles of derived representation. So, one might question whether they can really be understood in terms of derived representation.

I want to suggest that, while there is no specific vehicle of derived representation in the case of standing propositional attitudes, there is a bearer of the derived representational properties. Let us consider first an analogy: The words and sentences in a book derivatively represent various contents. But the book as a whole might have further overall themes, morals, or meanings. These further—we might say, *global*—contents are derivatively represented: they are instances of representation that are derived from our own ascriptions—where else could they come from?—though they do not have specific words or sentences as vehicles. We might say that the book as a whole is the vehicle of representation, but this is not to say that the book represents its global contents in the same way that its words represent their contents—while words “stand for” or in some sense are “symbols” for their contents, the book does not “stand for” or serve as a “symbol” for its global contents, though it does contain them or have them in some broader sense.<sup>21</sup>

My suggestion is that a standing propositional attitude is a global content of oneself as a whole, analogous to a book’s global contents. We ascribe them not to specific immediate contents or other mental items but rather to ourselves as wholes, and what it is for us to “have” them is not for us to “stand for” them or

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<sup>21</sup>Thanks to David Bourget for offering this example of non-mental derived representation absent specific vehicles.

serve as “symbols” for them but rather for them to belong to us or be contained in us as a book has or contains its global contents.

On the proposed account, then, we self-ascribe beliefs, desires, and other standing states. We do this by self-ascribing contents that include both attitude and non-attitude content components, which, assuming attitude representationism, specify both the attitude and the content of the self-ascribed state. As in the case of occurrent propositional attitudes, there is more than one way to self-ascribe a standing propositional attitude. One fairly undemanding way is to be disposed to accept the attitude as your own. This might be a matter of being disposed to have occurrent states with immediate contents stating that you represent a particular content. If these immediate contents derivatively represent various other contents (e.g., the rich descriptive, object-involving, and broad contents discussed in the previous section), then these contents are also inherited by the standing propositional states you self-ascribe. For example, suppose you are disposed to accept that you believe that George is a bachelor and you are disposed to have a cashing out thought specifying that <bachelor> cashes out into <unmarried man>. Then you have a standing belief that George is an unmarried man.

As in the case of occurrent propositional attitudes, there is reason to think that the standing propositional attitudes we self-ascribe more or less line up with the standing propositional attitudes we have first-order commonsense psychological intuitions about. If so, then there is reason to think that standing propositional attitudes, like occurrent propositional attitudes, are self-ascribed and hence derivatively represented.

## 5 Conclusion: Realism about propositional attitudes

Lynne Rudder Baker claims that realism about the attitudes is in no need of scientific validation. I think this is right, though for different reasons than Baker. Propositional attitudes are products of derived representation, and, when it comes to derived representation, thinking it is so *makes* it so—taking a content to be represented is all that is required for derived representation. And so, self-ascribing an attitude is all it takes for that attitude to really, actually exist.

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