

Talk about beliefs Mark Crimmins MITPress 1992, pp 214.

A good philosophy book has an easily-fixed position in a current debate, and uses this to make points or introduce devices which can be used by philosophers inclined to different positions in the debate. This book satisfies this criterion. The debate is about neo-extensionalist theories of belief. Crimmins' aim is to disagree with them. Belief for him is not just a relation between a person and the things referred to in a sentence. It is in fact (something like) a relation between a person and a proposition. But Crimmins' positive theory is meant to capture many of the insights of extensionalist theories. The propositions in question are extensional entities. Yet intensionality is preserved, to the extent that the truth values of ascriptions of belief differing only in the presence of co-extensive terms in the ascribing sentence may be different. The device that reconciles these at first sight incompatible elements is that of an unarticulated constituent of a statement. Following the outline in Crimmins and Perry's 1989 *Journal of Philosophy* article, it takes a belief ascription to refer implicitly to both the objects named in the *that* clause and various other things which are crucial to the identity of the belief and its semantic properties.

The full theory therefore has to provide an account of propositions as structures of complex objects and of the full content of belief-ascriptions, including the normally unarticulated elements. And these have to mesh. The theory of propositions is very complex. It's a real chore to read, in fact, and many readers may abandon the book in despair as chapter four wears them down. My impression is that the theory works, in that there are no obvious inconsistencies or inadequacies to it, as long as we stick to fairly simple propositions, of a kind that could be expressed in first order logic. One reason the theory has to be so complex is that it has to support an account of the individuation of belief-types which discriminates them

pretty finely. For that is what saves the phenomena of intensionality: if you say truly that Sam believes that Cicero is boring Sam is in a state involving his concept of boring and a 'notion' of Cicero, which is specified inexplicitly by the context, and which is not the same as the notion that is involved when you say, truly, that Sam believes that Tully is not boring . The account is quasi-extensional in that the state is specified by referring to Cicero, and it saves the intensional appearances because a notion is referred to as well as Cicero.

(A by-product of the account of propositions and beliefs is what is claimed to be an example of a system of mental representation that is not plausibly described as a language of thought. The example is interesting, though I am not convinced that an organism whose thoughts were represented by it could not be given a psychologically equivalent description in which the representation was more language-like. The example deserves more detailed discussion than Crimmins gives it.)

The technicalities come from trying to say this in full generality, for arbitrary beliefs. But in most particular cases the analysis is pretty simple. The crucial feature is that beliefs are individuated by the 'notions' and the like by means of which believers represent the objects we refer to in ascribing beliefs to them. It is not obvious that this is enough. Suppose that someone has a belief about a person in terms of one notion, which connects to the object by two referential routes. For example I have a notion of Tuesday-at-noon and I believe via my diary that I should be in my office to see a student then, and I believe as a result of a conversation first thing Tuesday morning that I should go sailing with a friend. At ten o'clock I can believe both that at noon I will be sailing and that at noon I will be in my office. This can be seen as a simple inconsistency. But just as we do not have to say that Sam believes that Cicero is boring and that Cicero is not boring, we do not have to see inconsistency here either. There are two beliefs, but the most natural way of individuating them is by reference not to different notions of a single object but to different referential relations the believer has to it. (A cognitive theory may then

postulate different notions. And this may or may not make a good theory. But it is not obviously required by the needs of belief-attribution.)

Another worry concerns specificity. Crimmins tends to analyse belief ascriptions so that they allude to specific notions. It seems to me more plausible in some cases to take them as asserting the bare existence of notions with a particular referent. For example you may reveal to me that you have two secret identities (so you might be both Batman and Spiderman or both Spiderman and Superman, but I don't know which two) and that Sam believes of you under some such identity that you will save the world. I then cannot think that Sam believes-of-you-via-N that you will save the world, where N is some publicly known persona, because I don't know what your secret identities are, nor where N is your notion of your secret identity, because there are two of them and Sam's belief links to just one of them. (And you may not know which.)

The two worries are related. Notions for Crimmins are features of people's cognition. We ascribe beliefs within conversations on the basis of very limited knowledge of people's cognition. What we do know about is how the conversation is going, and what names have been introduced into it by whom in what contexts. So we know how to connect with the various referential chains that have entered the conversation, and we can use them to attribute beliefs to people. (This is closely related to what Crimmins calls 'bootstrapping', when the use of a term allows a hearer to refer to whatever notion of its referent the person using it had.) But to do this we do not have to know anything at all about the representations people use. We just have to know that they have representations which they use to connect with referential chains. In the secret identity example above the public personae (batman etc.) are publicly-tappable referential chains. They are not features of people's individual cognitions. So we can identify people's representations by what they represent, and by how they link with what they represent, but to do this we do not need any knowledge of their person-specific cognitive roles.

I have spent more time trying to counterexample Crimmins theory

than may be normal in a short review. I have done this partly because I found the theory very impressive, and yet felt that there were hidden assumptions that I was not sure I would accept. Attempting to disagree with it, I find that the assumptions are basically that a theory of belief must be driven by a theory of cognition, rather than a theory of ascription. That assumption may be right, but I wish it had been more explicit. (There is a very deep question here, of which features of belief result from constraints on our routines of attribution, and which from fundamental features of our cognition.) In any case, though this is a difficult book, it is also an original, challenging, impressive, and stimulating one.

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