Ultra-Liberal Attitude Reports

Kyle Blumberg[*]

Ben Holguín[†]

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Abstract

Although much has been written about the truth-conditions of de re attitude reports, little attention has been paid to certain 'ultra-liberal' uses of those reports. We believe that if these uses are legitimate, then a number of interesting consequences for various theses in philosophical semantics follow. The majority of the paper involves describing these consequences. In short, we argue that, if true, ultra-liberal reports: (i) bring counterexamples to a popular approach to de re attitude ascriptions, which we will call 'descriptivism'; and (ii) combine with independently plausible principles about the logic of belief to imply that subjects can achieve omniscience about what exists from the armchair. Although we are not committed to the view that ultra-liberal reports are false, in the final part of the paper we discuss the prospects of pursuing a line according to which the acceptability of such reports ought not be taken at face value. We conclude by arguing that those who are sympathetic with this move might have reason to doubt the truth of an even broader class of acceptable

[*]New York University, khb251@nyu.edu.
[†]New York University, bwh247@nyu.edu.

de re attitude reports, namely those that have been taken to undermine orthodox accounts of de re attitude ascriptions.

1   Introduction

Much has been written about what we should take the correct truth–conditions of de re attitude ascriptions to be. What has been far less discussed is the extent to which the truth–conditions must account for some particularly liberal patterns of use. An example of the pattern we have in mind is (1) in the context of Tennis:[1]

Tennis: Ann is a six-year-old girl whom Pete, an expert in tennis pedagogy, has never met and whose existence he is unaware of. Pete believes that every six-year-old can learn to play tennis in ten lessons. Jane, Ann's aunt, is aware of Pete's feelings on the matter. Jane wants to encourage Ann's father, Jim, to sign Ann up for tennis lessons, so in conversation with Jim she asserts the following:

(1)   Pete believes Ann can learn to play tennis in ten lessons.

If true, we think that reports such as (1) have interesting consequences for a number of theses in philosophical semantics. The majority of the paper involves describing these consequences.[2] In short, we argue that reports such as (1) ('ultra-liberal' attitude reports): (i) bring counterexamples to the dominant approach to de re attitude ascriptions, which we will call 'descriptivism'; and (ii) combine with independently plausible principles about the logic of belief to imply that subjects can achieve omniscience about what exists from the

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[1]We get this case from Recanati (2012, 152). Our analysis of the case (and related ones) is, to our knowledge, original.

[2]Goodman (forthcoming) also considers some of the results of taking de re attitude ascriptions at face value, with emphasis on issues surrounding so-called 'singular thought'. She argues that given popular methodological assumptions, such ascriptions collapse the distinction between singular and descriptive thought. We argue that the problem is more severe: in Goodman's terms, these ascriptions collapse the distinction between singular and *wholly general* thought.

armchair. Although we are not committed to the view that ultra–liberal reports are false, in the final part of the paper we discuss the prospects of pursuing a line according to which the acceptability of such reports ought not be taken at face value. We conclude by arguing that those who are sympathetic with this move might have reason to doubt the truth of an even broader class of acceptable de re attitude reports, namely those that have been taken to undermine orthodox accounts of de re attitude ascriptions.[3]

2   Set up: de re reports and Face Value

In this section, we present some of the background needed for our discussion. First, we make clear what we mean by 'de re attitude report'. Then we discuss a principle that connects the acceptability of sentences in context to the truth of those sentences in context; we call this principle *Face Value*.

2.1   De re attitude reports

As Yalcin (2015, 210) notes, there is something of a 'terminological morass' around the terms *de dicto* and *de re*. Sometimes the terms are used to mark a metaphysical distinction between two kinds of *mental state*, while other times they are used to mark a purely *syntactic* distinction between different sorts of attitude reports.

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[3]For an example of a member of this broader class of reports, consider a variant of Hawthorne & Manley (2012, 28)'s Warship:

Warship: In 1512, Henry VIII ordered the construction of a great warship to be called *Henry Grace à Dieu*. He knows that his order will be carried out on time, but is given no reports of the progress of the ship on the principle that no news is considered to be good news. On April 24th, after the expected date of completion, but before the king visited the harbor, he claimed that the ship was the finest in the French fleet.

Many speakers have the intuition that reports like 'On April 24th, 1512, Henry thought that *Henry Grace à Dieu* was a fine warship*'* are acceptable in this context, despite the fact that Henry failed to stand in any significant causal connections with the ship. We will discuss cases such as Warship and their significance for orthodox accounts of de re attitude ascriptions in §6.2.

Our primary focus is on the latter distinction, because we are interested in the truth-conditions of a certain class of sentences — '*de re* attitude reports'. Although there is controversy in how exactly to demarcate this class, for simplicity we offer the following sufficient condition. Where Φ is an attitude verb and ϵ is a name or indexical: any sentence of the form 'S Φs that ϵ is F' is a de re attitude report. So, for example, 'John believes that Ann dances' and 'Bill thinks I am hungry' are both de re reports on our usage.[4] The main question of this paper is the following: given the ways in which de re attitude reports are actually used, what do their subjects need to be like in order for them to be true?

It is an open question how much of the metaphysics and epistemology of de re thought should influence one's approach to this issue. However, we believe that questions about the semantics for these sentences are of independent interest — even for those who find it obvious that there can be cases in which a sentence that bears all the hallmarks of a de re attitude report fails to report a de re attitude. Towards the end of the paper we will consider the ways in which our arguments about sentences could affect debates about the mental. But until then it is important that these issues be sharply distinguished.

2.2   Face Value

We now want to draw attention to a general methodological principle. This principle plays an important role in relating intuitions about speech acts to semantic theorizing:

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[4]Three minor points of clarification. First, the reason this is a sufficient condition (rather than a definition) is that plausibly there are sentences *not* of the form 'S Φs that ϵ is F' that are nonetheless thought to deserve the label 'de re attitude report'. For instance, it is often argued that some attitude reports that contain so-called 'wide-scope' definite descriptions should count as de re. Likewise for reports that use the 'believes of' locution. Nothing we say in this paper is in tension with these ideas. Second, to avoid unnecessary complications, we ignore cases in which ϵ is a descriptive name. Third and finally, we will sometimes opt for more natural sounding reports that omit the 'that' complementizer.

Face Value: Other things being equal, if a sincere assertion of a declarative sentence ϕ sounds fine, then ϕ is true in context.

The principle requires some explanation. Although it is difficult to make the content of its ceteris paribus clause completely precise, here are two of the considerations that we intend to exclude by it: (i) cases in which speakers are confused about facts that are obviously relevant to the truth of ϕ, and (ii) cases in which speakers intend to speak insincerely or non-literally in uttering ϕ. However, what we want it *not* to exclude are considerations involving the philosophical or semantic consequences of taking ϕ to be true. In other words, that such-and-such philosophical theory would be false if ϕ were true is not sufficient evidence that the ceteris paribus clause should kick in. Of course, it may not always be possible to distinguish between the considerations we should and should not treat as 'making things equal', but we expect that our use of the principle will not trade on difficulties of this sort.

The purpose of Face Value is to bridge intuitions about the acceptability of sentences in context with facts about the truth of those sentences. Part of the motivation for the principle is that it is implausible that competent speakers would systematically judge that sincerely asserted falsehoods are acceptable, at least on matters about which those making the judgments are sufficiently sophisticated. After all, given that the utterances in question are made *sincere*ly, there is reason to wonder how a linguistic practice that allows for a gap between acceptability and truth could arise in the first place.

Still, one might wonder why we've even mentioned a principle like Face Value. Why not just work with intuitions about the *truth* of sentences in context? The reason is this. The cases we discuss are ones that raise to salience fine-sounding, sincerely expressed sentences that, if true, are suggestive of some conclusions one may be inclined to reject. If one wishes to do this, then more than likely

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one is going to have to deny that the sentences in question are true. But if one wants to do *that*, then given that the sentences we discuss sound fine in context, one is almost surely going to have to deny Face Value. Since we think being explicit about all this will aid in clarifying a number of the arguments that occur throughout the paper, we have decided to reason in terms of intuitions about the acceptability of sentences in context (rather than their truth), and to get to conclusions about what's true or false with a bridge principle like Face Value.

Of course, nothing we have said so far settles the question of whether Face Value is actually true. We reserve discussion of this issue for §6.

3   Ultra–liberal reports

In this short section, we introduce the class of reports that will be our focus. It is easiest to get a feel for the class by considering some cases. The first, Tennis, is repeated from above:

Tennis: Ann is a six-year-old girl whom Pete, an expert in tennis pedagogy, has never met and whose existence he is unaware of. Pete believes that every six-year-old can learn to play tennis in ten lessons. Jane, Ann's aunt, is aware of Pete's feelings on the matter. Jane wants to encourage Ann's father, Jim, to sign Ann up for tennis lessons, so in conversation with Jim she asserts the following:

(1)   Pete believes Ann can learn to play tennis in ten lessons.

Here are two more:

Booby Trap: My friend is watching me play a simple computer game designed by one person — Pavel Kedo. Kedo has never met me, and is unaware that I exist. My friend and I both notice a booby trap in the game, and I start chuckling. My friend asks: 'Why are you laughing?' In response, I say:

(2)   Kedo thought that I was going to fall for that.

Music: A music professor says to a dark, crowded auditorium: 'I want all the sisters here tonight to clap on the third beat. . .' My sister and her husband were listening to their iPods. They unplug the earphones and ask, 'What's going on?' Someone who is sitting nearby tells my sister:

(3)   He wants you to clap on the third beat.[5]

Each of (1)–(3) is acceptable in its respective context. We believe that the phenomenon exhibited by these reports can be characterized as follows. Tennis, Booby Trap, and Music are instances of a class of contexts in which de re reports of the form 'S Φs that o is F' are licensed in virtue of the salience of two facts: i) that S holds some *general* attitude Φ to the effect that all Gs are F and ii) that o is a G. In the case of Tennis, for instance, what seems to license (1) is the salience of first, Pete's belief that all six–year–olds can learn to play tennis in ten lessons, and second, the fact that Ann is a six–year–old. We will call the class of reports that fit this pattern *ultra–liberal reports*. (By extension, we will call contexts conducive to these reports *ultra–liberal contexts*.)

The substantive claim we defend in the next two sections is that given Face Value, the existence of ultra–liberal reports has significant consequences for a number of views in philosophical semantics.

4   Descriptivism

The primary argument of this section is that if reports like (1)–(3) are true in their respective ultra–liberal contexts, then each of a popular class of theories for the semantics of de re attitude ascriptions is inadequate.

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[5]This case is from (Pryor, 2004, 9).

4.1 The view

Many philosophers and linguists maintain that de re ascriptions involve quantification over 'vehicles of representation', entities that include things like *descriptions*, *individual concepts*, or *guises*. What unites these views is that the vehicles quantified over are not just object-denoting, but uniquely so: descriptions have uniqueness conditions, individual concepts are functions from possible worlds to individuals, and a guise is a 'route to a referent'. Examples of theorists who endorse proposals of this sort are Kaplan (1968), Sosa (1970), Lewis (1979), Aloni (2005), Maier (2009), Chalmers (2011) and Sæbø (2015), to name just a few.[6] For simplicity, we will take accounts that quantify over descriptions to represent the whole class of theories. So, to fix ideas, here is an *informal* presentation of the view that will be our focus:

Descriptivism: A de re attitude ascription 'S Φs that ϵ is F' is true just in case S Φs that the G is F, for some *suitable* description 'the G'.[7]

Exactly what counts as a 'suitable description' is a vexed issue, but at the very least descriptivists agree that 'the G' must denote ϵ — the object that the de re report is 'about' — at the context of utterance. This condition is all that is needed for ultra-liberal reports to pose a problem for descriptivism.

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[6]Whether Lewis (1979) ought to be included in this list depends on how one precisifies his notion of an 'acquaintance relation'. Our sense is that the most natural precisifcations will count his view among the class in which we are interested.

[7]We say that this statement of the view is informal because strictly speaking, the way in which we quantify into quotes on the right-hand side of the biconditional is problematic. Still, we think the intended interpretation is easy enough to recover. A more precise formalization of the view is available if we frame it in terms of individual concepts: 'S believes that ϵ is F' is true at w just in case there is some suitable individual concept G such that for every w' compatible with what S believes in w, $F_{w'}(G(w'))$. We prefer our (sloppy) formulation because we find the arguments and intuitions easier to evaluate when phrased in terms familiar from ordinary language rather than theoretical posits like individual concepts.

4.2   The problem

To see the problem raised by ultra–liberal reports, let us focus on (1) ('Pete believes Ann can learn to play tennis in ten lessons'). Given Face Value and the fact that (1) is acceptable in the context of Tennis, the report is true. According to the descriptivist, then, there is some suitable description 'the G' such that Pete believes that the G can learn to play tennis in ten lessons. Our question: what could 'the G' possibly be in this case? No description whose content relies on Pete bearing a significant causal relation to Ann will work, given the facts of the example. Nor can it be a description that involves Pete's more general beliefs, e.g. that *the tallest six–year–old* can learn to play tennis in ten lessons, for there is no guarantee that Ann 'stands out' among the six–year–olds in any such way. So, as far as we can tell, there needn't be any description 'the G' that uniquely denotes Ann and is such that Pete believes the G can learn to play tennis in ten lessons. Thus, despite its acceptability, the descriptivist must predict that (1) is false.[8]

4.3   The ordering trick

What can the descriptivist say about sentences like (1)? The main line we expect her to take is to argue that despite appearances, suitable descriptions do exist — they just take a bit more work to find.

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[8]Although this section focuses on a problem for descriptivism, it is worth pointing out that other accounts are threatened as well. For instance, on the theory of Crimmins & Perry (1989), de re ascriptions involve implicit *reference* to guises, and do not quantify over them (thus their account is not a kind of descriptivism, as we have defined the term). Clearly, it is just as difficult to find a particular referent for the report (1) as there is finding a suitable domain for quantification.

These reports also pose a problem for theorists who quantify over vehicles at the level of the *metaphysics of the attitudes*. For example, Salmon (1986) appeals to such vehicles in giving an account of the two–place relation Φ in terms of the three–place relation of Φ*ing a proposition under a mode of presentation*. (See (McKay & Nelson, 2014) for a detailed discussion of this sort of proposal.) For Salmon, if (1) is true, then Pete needs to possess a 'guise' of Ann. But as we have just seen, (1) is acceptable despite the fact that Pete possesses no such thing. Thus, the problem we have raised is one that arises for all of those who quantify over vehicles of representation, regardless of where it is encoded.

The idea is something like this. Pete has many implicit beliefs about six–year–olds. For instance, in *some* sense of 'implicitly' — perhaps a rather ordinary one — Pete implicitly believes that the shortest six–year–old can learn to play tennis in ten lessons. So perhaps Pete also implicitly believes that the second shortest six–year–old can learn to play tennis in ten lessons, that the third shortest can, ..., and that the nth shortest can (i.e., that the tallest can). Supposing that no two six–year–olds share a height, and that Ann is the qth tallest six–year–old, the descriptivist could argue that a suitable description in the context of Tennis is 'the qth tallest six–year–old'. That is to say: the descriptivist can try to account for the truth of (1) in terms of the fact that Pete implicitly believes that the qth tallest six–year–old can learn to play tennis in ten lessons.

This suggests a general strategy the descriptivist can employ to handle ultra–liberal reports: find some ordering on the Gs, and then explain the truth of 'S believes ϵ is F' in terms of the fact that S believes that the qth G is F (where q is ϵ's number in the ordering). Call this strategy the 'ordering trick'. If it is successful, then the descriptivist may rightly claim that cases like Tennis pose no special problem for her view.

4.4 A problem with the ordering trick

A serious difficulty with the ordering trick is that it relies on the assumption that subjects hold the right kinds of beliefs about the size of the sets in question. For example, in the case of Tennis, it assumes that Pete believes that at least q six–year–olds exist. However, Pete might well be agnostic about the number of six–year–olds. If so, there will be some natural number r such that for any m greater than r, Pete is agnostic that the size of the set of six–year–olds is m or greater. Suppose r is 60 million. Thus, for any m greater than 60 million, it is

not the case that Pete believes there is an mth tallest six–year–old. After all, if Pete doesn't believe that there are at least m six–year–olds, he won't believe that there is an mth tallest one. If q *(*Ann's number in the ordering) is greater than 60 million, then it is *not* the case that Pete believes that the qth tallest six–year–old can learn to play tennis in ten lessons. But there is no guarantee that Ann's number in the ordering will indeed be less than 60 million.

A similar argument applies to any proposed ordering of the six–year–olds, e.g. in terms of hand size, or distance from the North Pole. Likewise for any candidate set containing Ann, e.g. the set of individuals at elementary school, the set of children with at least one Aunt, etc. So even if the ordering trick allows the descriptivist to capture (1), there will almost surely exist ultra–liberal reports for which it will fail.[9]

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[9]Some have suggested that the ordering trick be defended as follows. Let us stipulate that for each natural number n, 'the G_n' denotes the nth tallest six–year–old if there is one, and otherwise denotes the tallest six–year–old. It is plausible that for each n, Pete believes that the G_n can learn to play tennis in ten lessons—at least in some (again implicit) sense of 'believes'. So even though Pete may not think that there are 60 million six–year–olds, he can still believe that the $G_{60,000,000}$ can learn to play tennis in ten lessons. After all, given that Pete thinks that all six–year–olds can play tennis in ten lessons and that there is at least one six–year–old, surely he will think that *if* there are 60 million six–year–olds, then the 60 millionth can, and that either way the tallest can. So supposing Ann is the 60 millionth tallest six–year–old, the descriptivist can appeal to '$G_{60,000,000}$' in order to capture the truth of (1).

Our objection to this line is that if the descriptivist is allowed to help herself to exotic conditional descriptions like 'the x that is the nth tallest F if there is one, else is the Z', then it's hard to see how she can avoid the consequence that in many contexts, subjects can be said to believe an enormous number of bizarre propositions. (The following argument is essentially due to Kripke (2011).) Suppose Pete falsely believes that p. Now consider the description H: 'the x that is the tallest six–year–old if p, and is the Eiffel Tower if not-p'. Presumably, to whatever extent Pete counts as implicitly believing that the $G_{60,000,000}$ can learn to play tennis in ten lessons, he will also count as believing that the H — i.e., the Eiffel Tower — can learn to play tennis in ten lessons. So now we have a prima facie argument for the conclusion that the the kind of mental states the descriptivist must appeal to in order to capture the (apparent) truth of (1) will commit her to thinking ascriptions like 'Pete believes the Eiffel Tower can learn to play tennis in ten lessons' are true as well. Surely this is a cost to the theory. To avoid it the descriptivist will have to argue that in the context of Tennis, the description $G_{60,000,000}$ is suitable for quantification while the description H is not. But whether she will be able to do so in a theoretically satisfactory manner is unclear to us. Thanks to Jeremy Goodman and Harvey Lederman for discussion here.

4.5   Double vision

So far we have argued that ultra–liberal reports are direct counterexamples to descriptivism. Now we wish to argue that these reports also undermine one of descriptivism's central motivations, namely its otherwise natural treatment of 'double vision' scenarios. The short version of our argument is that the existence of ultra-liberal reports shows that a subject need not 'see the same object in two ways' to experience double vision — sometimes merely believing falsely that the intersection of two ordinary predicates is empty suffices.

Here is a typical double vision case from Quine (1956):

Spies: 'There is a certain man in a brown hat whom Ralph has seen under questionable circumstances; suffice it to say that Ralph suspects that he is a spy. There is also a gray-haired man who Ralph sees at the beach one day; Ralph recognizes this man to be Bernard J. Ortcutt, the town mayor, and Ralph believes that this man is no spy. Now Ralph does not know it, but the men are one and the same.'

In the context of Spies, both (4) and (5) are acceptable:

(4)   Ralph believes that Ortcutt is a spy.

(5)   Ralph believes that Orcutt is not a spy.

This presents the following puzzle: (4) and (5) appear to ascribe contradictory beliefs to Ralph when intuitively his beliefs aren't incoherent.

Descriptivists appear to have a neat solution to this puzzle: Ralph has two different (uniquely specifying) descriptions of Ortcutt, and these distinct descriptions ground the truth of (4) and (5).[10] Descriptivism's ability to handle such double vision cases is generally taken to be an important motivation for the approach.

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[10]Perhaps one such description could be 'the man in the brown hat', while another could be 'the man on the beach'. Of course, an analogous story may be told in terms of individual concepts or guises.

However, the lesson of ultra–liberal reports is that in some contexts, a general belief to the effect that all Gs are F can suffice for the truth of a report like 'S believes that o is F' (for some o that is G). This means that in principle, for *any* pair of predicates G and H that have a non–empty intersection, if S believes truly that there are Gs and that there are Hs, but believes falsely that there is nothing that is both G and H, then there will be some predicate F and some object o that is both G and H such that in certain ultra–liberal contexts, both 'S believes that o is F' and 'S believes that o is not F' will have true readings. If this is correct, then double vision cases cannot be defused by appealing to vehicles of representation, since subjects of ultra–liberal reports need not have such vehicles available to them.

Here is an example to illustrate the idea:

Logicians: Schmitt is a philosopher logician whom Henry has never met and whose existence he is unaware of. On the basis of (otherwise) reliable testimony, Henry believes both that all logicians are intelligent and that all philosophers are unintelligent. Suppose also that the senses of 'intelligent' and 'unintelligent' here are coordinated in the right sort of way: Henry, in his more reflective moments, could justifiably conclude that since all logicians are intelligent and all philosophers are unintelligent, no logician is a philosopher (and vice-versa).

Intuitively, one can imagine ultra–liberal contexts consistent with the details of Logicians. That is to say, there will be contexts in which the salience of i) Henry's beliefs about logicians and philosophers and ii) Schmitt's status as a philosopher logician will be sufficient to license each of the following reports:

(6)   Henry thinks Schmitt is intelligent.

(7)   Henry thinks Schmitt is not intelligent.[11]

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[11]For those struggling to imagine such contexts, it might help to consider a situation along the following lines. Henry gives a speech to an audience in which he describes his views on the virtues and vices of various kinds of academics. During the speech he asserts 'all logicians are

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If (6) and (7) are both true, then this is just another double vision case. As with Ralph in the case of Spies, we will have two true belief reports that appear to ascribe contradictory beliefs to Henry, a subject whose mental state is intuitively neither irrational nor incoherent. But again, contra descriptivism, Henry needn't possess any vehicles of representation for Schmitt.[12]

4.6 General descriptivism

In light of the inadequacy of the ordering trick, as well descriptivism's failure to fully account for the phenomenon raised to salience by double vision cases, the descriptivist may want to alter her view in the following way:

General Descriptivism: A de re attitude ascription 'S Φs that ϵ is F' is true just in case S Φs that every G is F, for some suitable *predicate G*.

General descriptivism has no difficulty handling ultra–liberal reports. In the case of Tennis, for example, we may assume that 'six–year–olds' is one of the suitable Gs, and can thus account for the truth of (1) in terms of Pete's belief that every six–year–old can learn to play tennis in ten lessons.

In more ordinary cases of de re attitude ascriptions — say, Spies — general descriptivism makes essentially the same predictions as ordinary descriptivism.

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intelligent' and 'no philosopher is intelligent'. Kit, who was in the audience, is now relaying some of Henry's views to Schmitt: 'To be honest I'm not sure what Henry thinks of someone like you. On the one hand he thinks you're intelligent because you're a logician, but on the other hand he's convinced you can't be intelligent because you're a philosopher. I'm not sure what to make of what he thinks.'

[12]Those who quantify over vehicles of representation at the level of the metaphysics of attitudes will account for (4) and (5) by rejecting *Naive Rationality:*

> *Naive Rationality*: An agent is irrational if she believes a proposition and its negation at the same time.

—in favor of *Sophisticated Rationality*:

> *Sophisticated Rationality*: An agent is irrational if she believes a proposition and its negation *in the same way* at the same time.

The idea is that although Ralph believes a proposition and its negation, this doesn't make him irrational, since he believes these propositions in two different ways — more precisely, he has two different vehicles of representation for Ortcutt (McKay & Nelson, 2014). However, for the reasons just discussed, Sophisticated Rationality by itself cannot explain the coherence of Henry's mental state, for he doesn't seem to represent Schmitt in *any* way (let alone two different ways).

'Ralph believes that Ortcutt is a spy' is true because 'the man in the brown hat' is one of the suitable Gs; that is to say, 'Ralph believes that Ortcutt is a spy' is true because Ralph believes that all of those who have the property of being a unique person in the brown hat are spies. Roughly put, general descriptivism treats the things ordinary descriptivism quantifies over — namely, descriptions — as just a special instance of a more general kind — namely, predicates. It is in this sense that we take the view to be a generalization of descriptivism.[13]

Whether general descriptivism is the right account of de re attitude reports is an issue we will not be able to settle here. However, we do want to register a worry about its predictive power. A proponent of the view cannot say much about the general conditions under which a de re attitude report is true, for according to her there basically aren't any. Suppose, for instance, that we wanted to know why in the context of Tennis it is very difficult to access good readings of 'Pete believes Ann is not a blonde', given that i) surely Pete believes that all brunettes are non-blondes and ii) Ann is a Brunette. The original descriptivist has an easy explanation: there is no predicate with a singleton extension G (e.g. 'Jane's daughter') that denotes Ann such that Pete believes that every G is not blonde. But the general descriptivist cannot help herself to an explanation of this kind. Instead, she must invoke the mechanisms of context-sensitivity — a black box of sorts — to explain why the predicate 'six–year-old' is one of the suitable predicates while the predicate 'brunette' is not.

In contrast, ordinary descriptivism employs a more limited notion of context. On that view, all context does is determine which ways of *representing an object* matter for the ascription of a de re attitude. Thus, descriptivism tells us something interesting about the general conditions for the ascription of de re attitudes: in particular, that the objects the reports are about are individually

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[13]Analogues of general descriptivism may be developed for accounts that employ other types of vehicles of representation.

represented in the minds of the relevant subjects.

Of course, as we have argued in this section, ordinary descriptivism cannot capture ultra–liberal reports such as (1). There is thus something to be said for general descriptivism's greater empirical coverage. However, as we hope to show in the next section, there are problems posed by ultra–liberal contexts that arise regardless of one's view of the semantics of de re attitude reports.

5   Logic of belief

The central argument of this section is that ultra–liberal reports combine with an independently plausible principle about the logic of belief to produce some surprising conclusions about de re knowledge ascriptions. The principle is this:

Existence: for any context C, minimally rational subject S, positive predicate F, and doxastic attitude verb Φ (e.g., 'believes', 'knows', 'suspects'): if 'S Φs that ϵ is F' is true in C, then so is 'S Φs that ϵ exists'.[14,15]

Existence implies that if one thinks that some object has some property or other, then unless one is irrational, one should think that that object exists. This principle has a fair bit of prima facie plausibility to it, so we will forego arguing in its favor. Our real interest here is in its interaction with ultra–liberal reports.

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[14]With the restriction to 'positive' predicates we intend to exclude predicates such as 'does not exist'.

[15]Some have reported skepticism about instances of Existence where Φ is substituted with 'suspects', or with other plausibly doxastic attitude verbs such as 'is moderately confident'. The worry is that inferences from the truth of sentences like 'Jim suspects that Jones is a spy' to the truth of sentences like 'Jim suspects that Jones exists' seem a bit odd. However, our sense is that to the extent that it is strange to report Jim as *suspecting* that Jones exists (when it is salient that Jim *knows* Jones exists), such strangeness can be explained away along roughly Gricean lines. Indeed, there seem to be contexts where it is clear that knowledge (or belief) *entails* suspicion, and thus that the doxastic states are compatible after all. For instance, in circumstances where it is a law that whenever one suspects that a suitcase is a bomb, one must report it to the relevant authority, it would be rather strange to bring up the fact that one *knew* that the suitcase was a bomb as one's reason for not reporting it. That said, if necessary we are happy to restrict Existence to the attitude verbs 'knows' and believes', for those are the only two that are essential to our argument.

5.1 Problematic trivial entailments

There are (at least) two sources of tension between Existence and ultra–liberal reports. The first is easy to spell out. In the context of Tennis, Existence in conjunction with the assumption that (1) (i.e. 'Pete believes Ann can play tennis in ten lessons') is true entails that the following sentence should be true as well:

(8)   Pete believes that Ann exists.

But (8) sounds terrible. And as far as we can tell analogs of (8) for other ultra–liberal cases are bound to sound terrible as well. This is difficult to explain on the assumption that both Existence and Face Value are true.

  Now, one could try to explain away the tension just described with a story that places a lot of weight on the mechanisms of context–sensitivity. The idea would be that although any context in which 'Pete believes Ann can play tennis in ten lessons' is true must be one in which 'Pete believes Ann exists' is true as well, it is quite difficult to consider the latter sentence in the same context as the former. How to explain *that* fact (the difficulty of resolving the two sentences in the same context) is another matter, though we imagine the most plausible approach will look something like this: reports that involve 'trivial' predicates like 'exists' typically invoke different contextual standards for the ascription of de re attitudes than do reports that involve more substantive predicates like 'can learn to play tennis in ten lessons'.[16] However, one worry we'll mention for this sort of response is that reports analogous to (1) involving 'trivial' predicates — for instance, 'can learn to play tennis in ten lessons or can't' — are also perfectly acceptable in context. Whether there is a fully adequate explanation of these facts is a matter we lack the space to explore here.

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[16]For an example of a story along these lines (though in application to a slightly different issue), see (Dorr, 2012, pp. 963-5).

5.2 Armchair census

The second argument for the incompatibility of Existence and the truth of ultra–liberal reports requires some groundwork. Recall that in common to all ultra–liberal contexts is the following: there is some attitude report of the form '*S* Φs that *o* is *F*' that is true (given Face Value) simply in virtue of the fact that it is salient that *S* Φs that all *G*s are *F* and that *o* is a *G*. We take this to motivate the following principle:

Insensitivity: If context *C* is such that '*S* Φs that *o* is *F*' is true in virtue of the fact that *S* Φs that all *G*s are *F* and that *o* is a *G*, then in *C*: for every *x* that is *G*: '*S* Φs that *x* is *F*' is true.[17]

What Insensitivity essentially says is that in ultra–liberal contexts (say, Tennis), what's good for the object of the de re report in question (Ann) is good for the rest of the *G*s as well (in this case, the other six–year–olds).

One argument for Insensitivity draws on the observation that in cases like Tennis, de re attitude reports that substitute the name of some other six–year–old for 'Ann' sound no worse than (1). Jane easily could have asserted of some other six–year–old (say, Little Johnny) that 'Pete believes Little Johnny can learn to play tennis in ten lessons', or, supposing Jane and Jim were standing in front of a group of six–year–olds, that 'Pete believes each of these kids can learn to play tennis in ten lessons'. The fact that each of these de re attitude reports would sound fine if asserted is strong evidence that each is true in actuality (again given Face Value).[18]

A further argument for Insensitivity is that one who rejects it must think that

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[17]Given Face Value, every ultra–liberal context satisfies the antecedent of Insensitivity.

[18]We should note that (counterfactual) assertability is not a fool-proof guide to truth, even on the assumption of Face Value. Presumably there are contexts in which both 'I am hungry' and 'I am not hungry' are counterfactually assertable, despite the fact that both can't be true at once. It seems clear to us that this sort of phenomenon is *not* operative in cases like Tennis, though to give a clear explanation why would require getting into complicated issues that are beyond the scope of this paper. We are fine leaving the 'counterfactual assertability' consideration as mere prima facie evidence in favor of the hypothesis that Insensitivity is true.

there exists some six–year–old — we'll use Little Johnny again — such that the de re belief report one gets by substituting that six–year–old for Ann (e.g., 'Pete believes Little Johnny can learn to play Tennis in ten lessons') is false in the context of Tennis.

We find this position difficult to defend. Given the details of the case, the *only* difference between Ann and Little Johnny is that Ann is salient to Jane and Jim while Little Johnny is not. But of course the salience here is interlocutor-sensitive, not ascribee-sensitive. To Pete, Little Johnny is just as 'salient' as Ann — which is just to say that neither is salient at all. So why should the facts about which attitude reports are true *of Pete* depend so sensitively on the facts about which six–year–olds are on the minds of those doing the reporting? To the extent that we have a pre-theoretic grip on the kind of thing belief reports are in the business of describing, it simply does not seem plausible that to know whether 'S believes that o is F' is true requires first knowing whether o is salient in the context of a conversation about S. The only part of Pete's mental state that is relevant to the ascription of (1) is his general belief that all six–year–olds can learn to play tennis in ten lessons. And with regards to that, Ann is as arbitrary a choice of six–year–old as Little Johnny. We thus find it hard to see how there could be a principled reason for assigning different truth values to (1) and its Little Johnny analog, and so find the case for Insensitivity compelling.[19]

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[19]One challenge to Insensitivity arises from contexts in which S is known to hold special beliefs about some members of G. For example, Pete might know Little Johnny and believe falsely that he (Little Johnny) is five, when in fact he is six. In virtue of this belief, Pete would not assent to 'Little Johnny can learn to play tennis in ten lessons', but he would still assent to 'Every six–year–old can learn to play tennis in ten lessons'. It might be argued that this a context in which i) 'Pete believes that Ann can learn to play tennis in ten lessons' is true (in virtue of Pete's believing that all six–year–olds can learn to play Tennis as well as Ann's status as a six–year–old), and in which ii) it is *not* the case that for every six–year–old x, 'Pete believes that x can learn to play tennis in ten lessons' is true.

We are skeptical of this line of thinking. When we are in the frame of mind where 'Pete believes Ann can learn to play tennis in ten lessons' is true, our sense is that 'Pete believes Little Johnny can learn to play tennis in ten lessons' must be true as well. Little Johnny is a six–year–old, after all, so if Pete really does believe that *all* six–year–olds can learn to play tennis in ten lessons — and remember we're in a context where that's enough to license the report about Ann — then it's hard to see why the Little Johnny report should be treated differently. On the other hand, if we're allowed to appeal to facts about Pete's particular

We may now present the argument that Existence along with Face Value entails that subjects can achieve de re a priori knowledge of the existence of just about any object. Let us stipulate with Premise 1 that there exists an ultra–liberal context C for the attitude verb 'knows a priori'.

Premise 1. In C: 'S knows a priori that o is F' is licensed in virtue of the fact that it is salient that S knows a priori that all Gs are F and that o is a G.

Premise 1 plus Face Value gets us Premise 2:

Premise 2. In C: 'S knows a priori that o is F' is true.

Given Insensitivity, Premise 2 gets us Premise 3:

Premise 3. In C: for every x that is G: 'S knows a priori that x is F' is true.

Which in combination with Premise 4 (i.e., Existence) —

Premise 4. For all x: If 'S knows a priori that x is F' is true, then 'S knows a priori that x exists' is true.

— gets us a schematic version of the problematic conclusion:

Conclusion. In C: for every x that is G: 'S knows a priori that x exists' is true.

Now for a context that plausibly satisfies Premise 1. Suppose that for ordinary reasons Jeremy knows a priori that all material objects are goats or non-goats.[20] Suppose also that there is a material object — a local goat, to be more precise

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relationship with Little Johnny to deny the truth of 'Pete believes that Little Johnny can learn to play tennis in ten lessons', then it seems just as reasonable to appeal to the fact that Pete is ignorant (by ordinary standards) of Ann's identity to deny the truth of the report about her. In short: when one makes Pete's discriminating beliefs about Little Johnny salient, it is plausible that one has shifted out of an ultra–liberal context. Thanks to Jeremy Goodman for discussion of this point.

[20]In fact, this is almost surely the only way he could know it — we doubt anyone arrives at it by induction, for instance.

— named 'Mr. Philip'. According to the above argument, in any of a certain class of contexts — namely those that are ultra–liberal with regards to 'Jeremy knows a priori that Mr. Philip is a goat or a non-goat' — we may truly say of each and every material object that Jeremy knows that it exists.

We think it would be very surprising if there were no contexts in which the salience of Jeremy's a priori goat versus non-goat knowledge plus Mr. Philip's status as a material object were sufficient to license an assertion of 'Jeremy knows a priori that Mr. Philip is a goat or a non-goat'. For a rough sketch of an example, just imagine that it is salient in context that certain foolish people believe that there are material objects that are neither goats nor non-goats, but also that Jeremy is not such a person. Supposing we wanted to communicate this fact about Jeremy, one way of doing so would be to point to Mr. Philip and say (with focus, if necessary) '*Jeremy* knows a priori that Mr. Philip is a goat or a non-goat (though not everyone here does)'. By Insensitivity and Existence, it follows that in this context, every sentence of the form 'Jeremy knows a priori that *that* material object exists' is true.[21]

One who accepts both Face Value and Existence thus appears to be committed to the conclusion that in certain contexts — namely those like the one just described — we may truly say of an individual that that person knows a priori of each and every G that it exists. We find this conclusion deeply counterintuitive.

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[21]It has been suggested that the same conclusion may be reached without the use of Existence. The idea is this. There's a sense in which each of us knows a priori that everything that exists exists. Now with this sense in mind, suppose there is a context C in which the salience of i) S's a priori knowledge that everything that exists exists and ii) o's status as an existing object licenses the report 'S knows a priori that o exists'. Then, by Insensitivity, it follows that in C, for every x such that x exists — and that's really everything — 'S knows a priori that x exists' is true.

We are somewhat resistant to this version of the argument. The basic worry is that it is implausible that there any such ultra–liberal contexts. We find it difficult to imagine a situation in which the salience of S's (a priori) knowledge that everything that exists exists is enough to license an assertion of 'S knows a priori that o exists.' Maybe such utterances are tolerable when the relevant o is a mathematical object or God or something, but in that case it's quite unclear that the salience of the *general knowledge* that everything that exists exists plays any role in licensing the assertion. Thanks to Jeremy Goodman for discussion here.

Moreover, there are considerations that tell against this conclusion that extend beyond brute semantic intuitions. Philosophers have been interested in the notion of de re *thought*, a kind of mental state characterized by its roles in the philosophy of mind and epistemology.[22] To the extent that we have intuitions about the demands it places on subjects who instantiate it, it strains credulity to think that Jeremy could have de re a priori knowledge about the existence of every object. Yet if there are ever ultra–liberal contexts of this kind, then there are situations in which sentences that appear to ascribe de re a priori knowledge to subjects like Jeremy are true for rather surprising reasons. This means that one who favors the conjunction of Face Value and Existence must accept one of the following two conclusions: either i) whatever de re a priori knowledge is, it's not the kind of thing that requires some special sort of cognitive achievement — all that it requires (at least in some contexts) is that one know a tautology;[23] or ii) de re attitude ascriptions are not in the business of describing de re thought.[24]

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[22]For examples of the relevance of de re thought to various philosophical problems, see Donnellan (1979) on the contingent a priori and Kripke (2011) on the epistemology of mathematics. See Jeshion (2010b) for a more general discussion.

[23]And notice that the tautology in question needn't even *presuppose* that there are any objects of the relevant kind. It is plausible that one can know a priori the proposition that all Gs are F or not F while remaining agnostic on the question of whether there are any Gs; however, the same cannot obviously be said of the proposition that the G is F or not F. This suggests that the kind of de re a priori knowledge involved in our cases is truly quite liberal — in fact, substantially more so than the kind described and defended in (Dorr, 2012).

[24]For instance, one might be tempted to maintain that a report 'S believes that p' can be true without S believing the proposition that p — S need only believe a proposition that is suitably related to the proposition that p. (Both Bach (1997) and Graff Fara (2013) argue for such a conclusion, but they are not motivated by ultra–liberal reports.) But this sort of view faces a considerable difficulty: how can the relevant relation be made precise in such a way that the resulting account is reasonably constrained? To get a sense of the difficulty, notice that the relation cannot be logical entailment, since, e.g., the proposition that all six-year-olds can learn to play tennis in ten lessons doesn't entail that Ann can learn to play tennis in ten lessons.

In a similar vein, Goodman (forthcoming) distinguishes between 'entertaining' a proposition and 'believing' it, and takes entertaining a singular proposition to be a necessary condition on de re thought. Presumably, Goodman would embrace ii) and say that our cases are ones in which subjects believe the proposition expressed by the prejacent (making the relevant reports true) without *entertaining* that proposition.

A concern with both sorts of views sketched above is that it is hard to see how we could explain or justify principles like Existence if we want to deny that there is any deep connection between (on the one hand) *sentences* that ascribe de re attitudes and (on the other) *mental*

6   Face Value and Toy Ducks

Our central concern in this paper has been to outline some of the consequences of taking ultra–liberal reports to be true, rather than to evaluate those consequences. That being said, we are confident that many will find at least some of the consequences problematic. Therefore, it is worth considering what grounds there could be for discounting the data. The most natural route we can see is to deny Face Value (repeated from above):

   Face Value: Other things being equal, if a sincere assertion of a declarative sentence ϕ sounds fine, then ϕ is true in context.

6.1   Ultra–liberal reports as toy ducks

To see how one could get into a skeptical frame of mind concerning Face Value, it will help to change subjects for a moment. Kripke (2011) argues for the existence of what he calls the 'toy duck fallacy'. According to Kripke, the fallacy arises when one tries to construct semantic theories that take seriously examples like the following:[25]

   Toy Duck: A parent takes a child to a toy store. The toys are plastic models of various animals. The child points to a toy duck and asks, 'Is that a goose?' The parent responds, 'No, that's a duck.'

   The parent's response sounds fine, but, claims Kripke (2011, 345-346), to think it gets at the literal truth is to commit the toy duck fallacy:

> Some morals plainly should not be drawn from this type of example. First
> that there are two kinds of duck: some are living organisms, others are
> made of plastic. Or, that the term 'duck' is ambiguous. It has a narrow

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states of a certain sufficiently 'object related' kind. Why think that the truth of 'Pete believes Ann can learn to play tennis in ten lessons' should entail the truth of 'Pete believes Ann exists' if the principles governing belief ascriptions are in an important sense detached from facts about rationality or human psychology in the first place?

[25]This example is a slightly adapted version of Kripke (2011, 345)'s.

sense in which the duck has to be an organism, and a broader one in which it could be made of plastic. Nor could we argue, for example, that the term 'duck' has a unitary broad sense, including both the plastic toys and the water fowl, but that in certain contexts there is a pragmatic implication that the duck must be a biological animal...One should not conclude that something...ought to be recognized by a dictionary or semantic theory, even though there are appropriate circumstances in which one would say it.

We will not attempt to give a precise characterization of the fallacy Kripke takes himself to have identified. A general sense of the phenomenon should be enough to understand the view we are interested in sketching (if not necessarily defending).

The idea might be expressed like this. There is a phenomenon that Kripke's toy store example is a paradigm instance of. We call utterances that are examples of this phenomenon 'toy duck utterances'. Toy duck utterances are *like* the paradigm cases of insincere or non-literal speech — e.g. exaggeration, irony, metaphor, etc. — in that the propositions they express are strictly speaking false, though perhaps in the neighborhood of relevant truths. But they are *un*like the paradigm cases in the following important respect: when interpreted literally, toy duck utterances do not broadcast their unacceptability in the way instances of exaggeration, irony, and metaphor seem to. The existence of the toy duck phenomenon thus suggests that taken at face value, Face Value is false.[26,27]

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[26] One might think that because Face Value (as stated) leaves it somewhat open which kinds of considerations trigger the ceteris paribus clause, there are ways of interpreting it such that toy duck cases are *not* counterexamples to the principle. One who is inclined towards these sorts of interpretations should take the central suggestion of §6.2 to be that ultra–liberal reports *also* trigger the ceteris paribus clause (rather than that they are counterexamples to Face Value).

[27] Some might want to take the considerations discussed in (Nunberg, 1995) as evidence that reports such as those in Toy Duck are literally true. We're skeptical that Nunberg's cases are genuinely analogous, though we lack the space to explore these issues here.

With this in mind, it could be claimed that the relevant utterances in ultra–liberal contexts are precisely of this sort — toy ducks.[28] In asserting (1), Jane does *not* speak truly, even if her utterance sounds fine. And likewise for the utterances of (2)–(3) as well as (6)–(7) in their respective contexts: the speakers of these sentences assert fine-sounding falsehoods. The central reason for classifying ultra–liberal reports as toy ducks rather than as instances of exaggeration, irony, metaphor, etc. is grounded in semantic phenomenology: utterances like 'Pete believes Ann can learn to play tennis in ten lessons' *feel* more like 'That's a duck' than, e.g., 'Juliet is the sun'. Whether there is a genuine linguistic kind here — one that ultra–liberal reports and Kripke's toy duck example are both instances of, but that is also putatively unlike more familiar cases of non-literal speech — is a question that is beyond the scope of this paper. Still, our sense is that one who is sympathetic with the view that ultra–liberal de re attitude reports are false will be better suited to explain the acceptability of those reports by considering what ought to be said about cases like Kripke's.

6.2   'Liberal' reports as toy ducks?

We conclude with a point about the broader implications of taking ultra–liberal reports to be toy ducks. Early work on the semantics of de re attitude ascriptions often assumed that the truth of such ascriptions required the satisfaction of particular causal relations between subject and object.[29] The thought was motivated in large part by its ability to explain why (9) is *un*acceptable in Shortest Spy:

Shortest spy: Ralph has the general belief that there are spies, without suspecting anyone in particular. Indeed, he has never seen, touched, or heard of Bill, who happens to be the shortest spy. Nevertheless, Ralph believes that there are only finitely many

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[28]Kripke maintains that reports similar to (10) in Warship (discussed below) are instances of the fallacy as well.

[29]See, e.g., (Kaplan, 1968).

spies, and that it would be very unlikely for any two of them to be exactly the same
height. He thus deduces that there is a unique shortest spy, and comes to hold the
trivial belief that the shortest spy is a spy.

(9)   Ralph believes that Bill is a spy.

However, general causal constraints have fallen out of favor with contempo-
rary semanticists. The reason for this is that no such constraints appear to
be compatible with the full range of ordinary intuitions about the acceptabil-
ity of attitude reports in context. Consider the following case adapted from
Hawthorne & Manley (2012, 28) (repeated from fn.2):

Warship: In 1512, Henry VIII ordered the construction of a great warship to be
called *Henry Grace à Dieu*. He knows that his order will be carried out on time, but is
given no reports of the progress of the ship on the principle that no news is considered
to be good news. On April 24th, after the expected date of completion, but before
the king had visited the harbor, he claimed that the ship was the finest in the French
fleet.

In context, (10) is acceptable:

(10)   On April 24th, 1512, Henry thought that *Henry Grace à Dieu* was a fine
       warship.

But as some theorists have argued, no plausible general constraints can explain
the felicity of (10) (and other related reports).[30]

However, if the response to ultra–liberal reports like (1)–(3) is to treat them
as exceptions to Face Value, then one might wonder whether the same ought

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[30]See (Hawthorne & Manley, 2012, ch.2) for discussion. For a sense of the full generality
of the challenge faced by those who favor causal constraints, consider cases like the following
(also due to Hawthorne & Manley (2012)). Suppose Ralph thinks, for purely general reasons,
that the shortest politician is the shortest spy. Indeed, suppose Ralph has never met, seen, or
even heard of the shortest politician. In some contexts it will be appropriate for one of us to
assert the de re belief report 'There is someone Ralph believes to be the shortest spy', even
though it is known that Ralph doesn't stand in any notable causal relation to the shortest spy.
Cases of this sort illustrate how easy it is to construct contexts where de re attitude ascriptions
are acceptable but no interesting causal constraints appear to be in play. Crimmins (1992,
86-92) makes similar points.

to be done for reports like (10). The thought is that there is no principled reason to draw the 'toy duck' line somewhere between ultra–liberal cases and cases such as Warship, rather than between cases such as Warship and those in which 'thicker' constraints are satisfied. Given that those who reject Face Value in response to ultra–liberal cases are going to ignore (for the purposes of semantic theorizing) at least *some* fine sounding de re attitude ascriptions, and given that there are no obvious principled differences between these reports and reports such as (10), why not ignore the latter as well?

7 Conclusion

We have tried to show that ultra–liberal reports have interesting consequences for a number of theses in philosophical semantics. We argued that (if true) these reports: (i) bring counterexamples to a popular approach to de re attitude ascriptions, namely descriptivism; and (ii) imply that subjects can achieve omniscience about what exists from the armchair. Our central concern was not to argue directly that these reports are false. However, in the final part of the paper we considered what motivation there could be for taking such a line. We argued that those who are sympathetic with this move have reason to doubt the truth of an even broader class of acceptable reports, namely those used to challenge orthodox accounts of de re attitude ascriptions. Although our diagnosis of ultra–liberal reports has been tentative, we hope to have shown that much can be learned by studying them.[31]

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