

## Propositional Attitude Ascriptions And Context-Dependence

In **Section 4.11** (“The Context Dependency Of Meaning Ascriptions”) of Coming To Our Senses: A Naturalistic Program For Semantic Localism, Michael Devitt defends the “early Quinean” view that propositional attitude ascriptions are only “mildly context dependent”. According to Devitt, a propositional attitude ascription can be: (i) “simply transparent”; or (ii) “rapport transparent”; or (iii) “opaque” -- and it will be the context of tokening, in particular the intention of the speaker, which determines the category to which a particular tokening of a propositional attitude ascription belongs. Moreover, according to Devitt, this is the *only* special kind of context dependence which is exhibited by propositional attitude ascriptions; any other kinds of context dependence which a propositional attitude ascription exhibits may be traced to components of the ascription which would exhibit that kind of context dependence whether or not they were embedded in propositional attitude ascriptions.

I think that propositional attitude ascriptions are probably far more radically context dependent than Devitt supposes. Consequently, I think that the arguments which Devitt gives in favour of the merely mild context dependence of propositional attitude ascriptions can’t be any good. My main aim in what follows is to explain why these arguments fail; however, along the way, I shall also indicate some of the reasons why one might think that propositional attitude ascriptions are more radically context dependent than Devitt supposes.

Devitt begins with an argument for the claim that the context dependence of propositional attitude ascriptions is “*clearly not very radical*”. On the one hand, consider the content clause “that p” of any propositional attitude ascription. According to Devitt, it is clear that there are “indefinitely many meanings it could not be used to ascribe”. On the other hand, consider my literal tokening of a particular sentence “S” which does not contain demonstratives or other radically context-sensitive components. According to Devitt, “there are only a small number” of English content clauses which could be used “to ascribe any of the meanings of this utterance of mine, however the context is varied”. Thus, concludes Devitt, if content clauses are indexicals, “they are certainly not nearly as indexical as demonstratives like ‘this’ and ‘that’.” The meanings of a content clause “limit the meanings it can be used to ascribe”.

I take it that Devitt commits himself to the following two theses here: (i) given any sentence “S”, there are indefinitely many sentences “S<sub>i</sub>” such that “X believes that S” and “X believes that S<sub>i</sub>” must differ in literal semantic meaning, no matter how the contexts of tokening vary; and (ii) for some sentence “S”, there are only a small number of S<sub>i</sub> such that, if X utters “S”, then “X said that S<sub>i</sub>” correctly reports what X said, no matter how the contexts of utterance are varied. Since the first of these theses seems evidently correct, I shall focus my attention on the second. Straight off, it is easy to see that there are severe restrictions on candidates for the sentence “S”. It is plausible to think that, for any singular term “s”, there are indefinitely many co-designative singular term constructions “s<sub>i</sub>”. But, then, if “S” contains a singular term, there will be indefinitely many “S<sub>i</sub>” for which “X said that S<sub>i</sub>” *when read transparently* correctly reports X’s tokening of “S” -- namely, those “S<sub>i</sub>” obtained by replacing “s” with “s<sub>i</sub>” in “S”. Since similar tricks can be played with other kinds of vocabulary -- predicates, sentential operators, etc. -- one may well be led to wonder whether there are *any* sentences which satisfy Devitt’s second thesis.

Suppose that I am right that the second thesis is false. How should Devitt reply? Well, I think that he should begin by noting that the second thesis doesn't capture what he wanted to say. One feature of the demonstratives "this" and "that" is that they can be used to pick out almost any objects as the context varies. Another feature of the demonstratives "this" and "that" is that they can be used to pick out indefinitely many different objects as the context varies. Clearly, as thesis (i) claims, propositional attitude ascriptions are not like the demonstratives "this" and "that" in the first respect: a given content clause cannot be used to pick out almost any meaning as the context varies. However, no defender of the "radical" context dependence of propositional attitude ascriptions has ever wished to maintain that propositional attitude ascriptions are like "this" and "that" in this respect. Rather, what defenders of the "radical" context dependence of propositional attitude ascriptions have wished to maintain is that that propositional attitude ascriptions are like "this" and "that" in the second respect: there are indefinitely many different meanings that propositional attitude ascriptions can have as context varies. It is *this* claim which Devitt wants to deny. The important question to ask when considering whether the context dependence of propositional attitude ascriptions is very radical is *not* whether there are indefinitely many meanings which "that Yeltzin has risen" could not be used to ascribe; *nor* whether there are only a small number of content clauses which could be used to ascribe any of the meanings of my utterance of "Yeltzin has risen"; but *rather* whether there are indefinitely many meanings which "that Yeltzin has risen" could be used to ascribe.

If we sought to encapsulate the kind of claim which Devitt wants to deny in a thesis which adverts to tokens of sentences and attitude ascriptions, then perhaps the best we could do is something like the following thesis: (iii) for some attitude ascription "X believes that S" -- where "S" does not itself contain indexicals or demonstratives or other radically context-sensitive devices -- there are indefinitely many "S<sub>i</sub>" such that "X believes that S" correctly

reports X's tokening of "S<sub>i</sub>" as the tokening of the attitude ascription varies. However, this thesis seems to be subject to the same kind of counter-example as thesis (ii). Moreover, I suspect that no formulation in terms of sentence-tokens, of the kind which Devitt offers, will work. The important question is whether there are indefinitely many meanings which the content clauses of (some) attitude ascriptions (not containing demonstratives or other radically context sensitive devices) can ascribe; in particular, the important question is whether there are indefinitely many different modes which can get ascribed as the context varies. So it seems that what is really required is a formulation something like the following thesis: (iii)' for some "X believes that S", there are indefinitely many modes such that "that S" attributes those modes as the context varies. I take it that it is really *this* thesis which Devitt wishes to deny.

## II

As Devitt emphasises -- and as no-one should wish to deny -- the meanings of a content clause limit the meanings it can be used to ascribe. Moreover -- as Devitt also emphasises, and as no-one should wish to deny -- there is good reason to think that there is an "intimate link" between the meanings which a content sentence can ascribe and the meanings which are possessed by its content sentence. Consequently, I think that it is reasonable to follow Devitt in thinking that a theory of propositional attitude ascriptions should meet the following two constraints:

**First Constraint:** The theory must make the intimate link close enough to explain the limitations on what a content clause can ascribe. The further this link departs from identity, the more difficult explaining this *may* become.

**Second Constraint:** The theory must explain how hearers use linguistic conventions together with accessible context to understand ascriptions. The more numerous the meanings that a content clause can ascribe, the more difficult explaining this *may* become.

Devitt claims that his “early Quinean” theory does much better in meeting these constraints than do its competitors; and, in particular, that it does much better than do competitors which suppose that thesis (iii)’ is true. In order to make the first steps towards an assessment of this claim, I shall begin by considering the details of Devitt’s argument for the view that his “early Quinean” does well in meeting the two constraints.

As background for his argument, Devitt provides an account of how hearers generally understand utterances, and of the roles which context can play in this understanding.

Beginning with the platitude that to understand an utterance is to associate the right set of meanings with it, he notes that, in some cases, the hearer can understand with only minimal help from the context because (a) the right set of meanings is the conventional one for the sentence tokened in the utterance; and (b) the hearer participates in the convention. (Devitt’s example: “Dogs have fleas”.) However, he goes on to observe that in other cases, the hearer may need more substantial help from the context, which may be of one of the following three kinds: (1) some tokenings, e.g. of indexical terms, may have as an associated rule or convention that (part) of the meaning of the relevant tokens is determined by a particular aspect of the context -- e.g. “I” conventionally refers to the speaker, “you” to those addressed by the speaker, “he” to a perceived and/or demonstrated male, etc. -- and the hearer’s understanding of the sentence tokening will be conditional upon detection of the appropriate aspect of context; (2) some sentence tokenings are ambiguous -- because more than one convention covers the syntax of the sentence (“visiting relatives can be boring”) or some part

thereof (“bank”) -- and typically the hearer’s understanding of the disambiguation which the speaker has in mind will depend upon guidance from accessible aspects of the context; and (3) some sentence tokenings are elliptical -- because the speaker omits things which are boringly obvious in the context (e.g. “in New York” from “it’s raining in New York” in a context in which one responds to a question about the weather conditions in New York) -- and, in these cases, the hearer’s understanding is guided by what is obvious in the context.

There are several questions which are naturally prompted by this account. In particular, given that the subsequent argument against radically context-sensitive accounts of propositional attitude ascriptions depends upon the assumption that there are no other roles which context can play in the determination of meanings, we need to ask whether the only roles for context in the determination of meaning are those which Devitt here enumerates, i.e. (1) supplementation of ellipses; (2) removal of ambiguities; and (3) determination of the content of indexical vocabulary according to the relevant rules. Moreover -- and not independently -- we need to ask how much theoretical weight can be borne by expressions like “what is obvious in the context”, “what is clearly accessible in the context”, “what the rule determines in the context”, and the like. It is platitudinous to claim, as Devitt does, that if a hearer’s understanding is to be guided by some aspect of the context, then that aspect must be accessible to the hearer; but it is much less clear that a good explanation of the understanding of ellipsis and ambiguity can simply advert to “what is obvious in the context”.

At least to begin with, it is very tempting to think that Devitt greatly underestimates the work which contextual features must do in the determination of meaning (quite apart from considerations to do with propositional attitude ascriptions). Consider a sentence token “S” under the assumption that one knows nothing about the context in which it is tokened.

Suppose that the sentence token is to be interpreted literally, and that it is indicative in force.

(Of course, these are things which may themselves need to be determined by the context.) If there are directly referential singular term tokens, then these are all potentially ambiguous -- i.e. their reference needs to be fixed by features of the context. If there are quantificational tokens -- or other relevantly similar constructions such as definite descriptions -- then there is the domain of quantification to be determined. If there are certain kinds of indexicals -- e.g. "she", "they" -- then there is the question whether these are demonstrative or anaphoric and, in either case, there is the further question of what it is to which they refer. If there are general terms, then there may well be implicit prefatory operators involved. (Consider Devitt's example: "Dogs have fleas". Until one is told more about the context, I don't think that one knows the content of a token of this sentence: "Typical dogs have fleas"?; "Most dogs have fleas"?; "Some dogs have fleas"?; "All dogs have fleas"?; "Many dogs have fleas"? "Necessarily dogs have fleas"?) If there are predicates, then there are nearly always potential ambiguities to be resolved; and, once gross ambiguities have been decided, there are borderline cases to be properly assigned. Then there is the question whether the sentence token should be taken to fall within the scope of an implicit operator ("according to the fiction", "in the painting", etc.) And so on.

Now, I suppose that one could say that, while this is all strictly speaking correct, nonetheless all of this context dependence can be classified under the headings of removal of ambiguity, supplementation of ellipses, and determination of indexical content. Moreover, I suppose that one could also say that, in every case, the features adverted to must be more or less obvious in the context, in at least the following sense: normal participants in conversation often are not conscious that they are doing any work at all in taking account of them. However, the important point is that, even if one says both of these things, one cannot deny that there are a great many different kinds of contributions which context makes to the determination of meaning or content. Moreover, even if the up-dating of conversational score -- the process of

score-keeping in a language game -- is something which we normally do without paying explicit attention to what it is that we are doing, it seems undeniable that it is actually a very complicated business: there can be complexities involved of which we are standardly quite unaware.<sup>1</sup>

### III

Devitt's argument that his "early Quinean" theory meets the two constraints is straightforward. On his view, propositional attitude ascriptions can be simply transparent, or rapport transparent, or opaque. If a propositional attitude ascription is simply transparent, then the meaning of an embedded singular term is its property of referring to a particular object, and it is just this very property which is the meaning that the content clause ascribes. If a propositional attitude ascription is opaque, then the meaning of an embedded singular term is its property of referring to an object by a certain mode, and it is just this very property which is the meaning that the content clause ascribes. So, in both these cases, the intimate link is identity, and the first constraint is satisfied. Moreover, the second constraint is also obviously satisfied: propositional attitude ascriptions can be ambiguous between a simply transparent and an opaque reading, but it is easy to see how contextual features could serve to disambiguate on any particular occasion. If a propositional attitude ascription is rapport transparent, then the meaning of an embedded singular term will not be its property of referring to a particular object (since, for example, the term in question may be used attributively), but nonetheless it will be this property which is the meaning that the content clause ascribes. In this case, the

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<sup>1</sup> In support of the main point here, one could point to the numerous difficulties which have beset Strong AI implementations of conversing machines.

intimate link is not identity, but it is close enough to meet the first constraint. Moreover, there are conventional shifts in the syntax of rapport transparent ascriptions which identify them as such -- “a is such that X believes it to be F”, “X believes of a that F” -- and which serve to ensure that the second constraint is satisfied.

Of course, there are various controversial claims which are made in the course of this argument, even granting the theoretical apparatus upon which it depends (and to which I shall here raise no objections). In particular, given Devitt’s account of “modes”, it is highly controversial whether the intimate link can be identity in the case of opaque ascriptions; and it is also controversial whether there are conventional shifts of syntax which serve to identify rapport transparent ascriptions.

The second point is easily made: some rapport transparent ascriptions involve anaphoric reference: and there need be no syntactic mark to show that this is so. (Consider: “Ralph believes him to be a spy”, uttered in a context in which “him” borrows its reference from the attributive ascription “the shortest spy”.) However, I take it that Devitt should just reply that this shows that attitude ascriptions can be three-way ambiguous -- and that it is easy to see how contextual features (including previous utterances) could serve to disambiguate on any occasion.

The first point is more tricky. According to Devitt’s preferred theory, “modes” are networks of d-chains. Consequently, on his preferred theory, one cannot correctly make opaque attitude ascriptions to non-linguistic creatures, pre-linguistic humans, foreigners who do not speak a word of one’s own language, and so on. But the plain fact is that we do make such ascriptions all the time. We can easily generate substitutivity puzzles involving the attitudes of babies and animals -- so it seems hard to see how one could suppose that all ascriptions are transparent in

these cases. Devitt himself says: “The nonlinguistic behaviour of [human babies and the higher animals] gives us reasons for thinking that they have thoughts. However, we feel (or should feel) uncomfortable in using ordinary attitude ascriptions to ascribe these thoughts. Why? Because, given the intimate link, an ordinary ascription requires us to find a sentence that (near enough) shares a meaning with the creature’s thought. We quite reasonably doubt that we have such a sentence. Even extensional ascriptions seem dubious: Are Fido’s thoughts “about bones” really about bones?” (57) But these remarks -- especially the give-away parenthetical “should” -- just don’t square with Devitt’s own announced methodology: given that we make such ascriptions all the time, there is a strong presumption that we ought to do so. Of course, even if this is right, it needn’t be taken to show that the intimate link is not identity in the case of opaque ascriptions, since one could prefer some other account of “modes” to the one which Devitt gives. (Moreover, in the present work Devitt is himself rather sceptical of the analysis of modes in terms of d-chains.) However, there is at least a question-mark here: until we know what account of “modes” is correct (or to be preferred), we can’t be sure that Devitt’s account of opaque attitude ascriptions satisfies the first constraint. Moreover -- and importantly -- it is at just this point that (some of) those who favour a more radically context-sensitive account of propositional attitude ascriptions disagree with Devitt: in their view, the meaning which a singular term embedded in a content clause ascribes is its property of referring to an object by a certain mode, but this need not be the same meaning which the singular term would have if it were not thus embedded.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Devitt’s insistence -- here and in previous work -- that non-human animals do not have attitudes whose content we can capture using our ascriptions seems to me to be mistaken. Evolutionary considerations strongly suggest that, if we have a LOT, then so do at least some non-human animals. Of course, we might need to do quite a bit of work to decide what content to attribute to the LOTs of non-human animals. However, even if Fido doesn’t have thoughts about bones, he clearly does have thoughts about something which we could call “dbones” (with a silent “d”), and which we could hope to characterise using a description. Compare with frogs: friends of modest content do not think that frogs have attitudes about flies -- but they nonetheless do suppose that frogs have attitudes about something like small dark moving objects (something which could be characterised with a great deal of precision). Moreover -- the important point in the present context -- it seems plausible to think that the LOTs of non-human animals will permit the kinds of simple puzzles which opaque attitude ascriptions

## IV

Devitt claims that “the Hidden Indexical theory” -- i.e. the theory which takes singular terms in content clauses to ascribe the property of referring to a certain object by a certain mode *which need not be the mode of that singular term, but may be some other mode which the speaker has in mind* -- is subject to two difficulties. *First*, it is unmotivated: there is no good argument in support of the claim that propositional attitude ascriptions have this kind of context dependence. And, *second*, it is in need of an explanation of how it can meet the second constraint; i.e. it needs an explanation of how some aspect of the accessible context can allow the hearer of a propositional attitude ascription to work out what mode the speaker has in mind. I shall consider these objections in turn.

1. *The problem about motivation*: In Devitt’s view, extreme context dependence views should be motivated by examples, and not merely by other theoretical commitments. But the examples which are offered are either those examples which were used to motivate the “early Quinean” theory in the first place -- and hence are readily seen to be easily handled by that theory -- or they are tricky, post-Quinean puzzles (Kripke’s “Pierre” and “Paderowski”, Richard’s “phone-booth”, etc.) which require at most a minor modification to the “early Quinean” theory. To illustrate the problem, Devitt refers to his own development of an example due to Stephen Schiffer, the case of Big Felix. *Briefly*: Smith is found dead. Ralph, the famous sleuth, suspects murder. Moreover, the manner of the slaying makes Ralph think

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can be used to exploit. (Fido readily identifies me almost all of the time; but not when I try to sneak over the back fence at 3 a.m. after a night on the turps.)

that whoever is responsible is insane. A newspaper reports this: “Ralph believes that Smith’s murderer is insane”. The murder was in fact committed by Big Felix, a well-known mobster. Big Felix frequents a certain bar, as does Mary. One evening, Mary overhears Big Felix’s conversation and concludes that he murdered Smith. She reads the newspaper report of the murder and, after learning the identity of the man she saw at the bar, says to a mobster: “Ralph believes that Big Felix is insane”.

Devitt comments: “In the original story, Mary has in mind that Ralph has his suspicions under the mode of ‘Smith’s murderer’. If the Hidden Indexical theory is correct, the conventions of English make it possible for the sentence “Ralph believes that Big Felix is insane”, in some context, to ascribe to Ralph a belief under that particular mode. And, in some other context, it could ascribe a different mode that Mary might have in mind, the mode ‘the man seen at the bar’, ‘the most successful mobster’, or whatever. So it has to be possible for “Ralph believes that Big Felix is insane” to be false in some context because the mode Mary has in mind is ‘the man seen at the bar’ whereas the mode under which Ralph has his suspicions is ‘Smith’s murderer’. In particular, it has to be possible for “Ralph believes that Big Felix is insane” to be false in some context even though Ralph would assent to “Big Felix is insane” because that is not the mode Mary has in mind. So far as I know, the literature contains no examples that support these possibilities, and I have been unable to imagine any”. (p.54-5)

In response to Devitt’s particular comment, I offer the following elaboration of Schiffer’s example: Ralph comes across Smith’s mutilated corpse, with the words “Big Felix” carved in his forehead. He concludes, correctly, that “Big Felix” is the name of the murderer, and is prepared to assent to the sentence “Big Felix is insane” (where, if required, he would expand this to: “Big Felix, the murderer of Smith, is insane”). He goes to a bar, and is introduced to a man named “Big Felix”. At first, he is very agitated; but various facts about the behaviour,

character, etc. of Big Felix convince him that it was someone else named “Big Felix” who murdered Smith. Everyone else at the bar, except for Mary, is aware that Ralph would not assent to the sentence “Big Felix is insane” (where this, if required, is expanded to: “Big Felix, the man at the bar, is insane”), and, indeed, would insist that “Big Felix is not insane” -- though, let us suppose, everyone else also knows that Ralph would assent to the sentence “Big Felix is insane”, where this would be expanded to “Big Felix, the murderer of Smith, is insane”. Mary, on the basis of some mistaken observations of Ralph’s behaviour, says to one of the other patrons: “Ralph believes that Big Felix is insane” (where, if required, she would expand this to: “Ralph believes that Big Felix, the man at the bar, is insane). The other patrons insist, correctly -- or at least so I claim -- that what she says is false. (In this context, the mode ‘the man at the bar’ gets attached to the name “Big Felix”; in other contexts, the mode ‘the murderer of Smith’ gets attached instead.)

Only two replies seem available. My guess is that Devitt will say that the elaboration turns the example into a “post-Quinean ‘puzzling’ example” which can only be properly treated *via* a “minor” modification of the “early Quinean” theory. More about this suggestion anon.

Another option is the suggestion that Mary’s utterance is strictly speaking true, though pragmatically inappropriate. I suspect that Devitt won’t like this option: if pursued, it is likely to lead all the way to a direct reference theory of a kind which Devitt rejects. If exportation to -- or classification in -- pragmatics is appropriate here, why isn’t it also appropriate in other cases (e.g. Lois Lane and Clark Kent)?

Suppose that Devitt does (and must) go with the “post-Quinean ‘puzzling’ example” option. Then his further remarks about the absence of examples from the literature seem to be a slip: at least some of the “post-Quinean ‘puzzling’ examples” are precisely examples of cases in which it is possible for an attitude ascription to be false in some context of evaluation, even

though the subject of the ascription would assent to a token of the content clause of the attitude ascription (perhaps even in a closely related context), because a mode associated with the content clause of the attitude ascription in the context in question is not a mode which the subject of the attitude ascription has in mind. Moreover, *pace* Devitt, the “post-Quinean ‘puzzling’ examples” in question do seem to provide support for the Hidden Indexical theory: for they do suggest that indefinitely many different modes may be associated with a given term as the context varies. Despite Devitt’s claims to the contrary, it seems that the Hidden Indexical theory *is* motivated by examples, and not merely by purely theoretical considerations. (Direct reference theorists should, I think, find motivation for a Hidden Indexical theory of the pragmatics -- appropriate assertability -- of propositional attitude ascriptions in these same examples.)

2. *The problem of accessibility*: Devitt claims that “the Hidden Indexical theory has real problems with the second constraint, with explaining how hearers use linguistic conventions together with accessible context to understand ascriptions” (p.55). First, he suggests, the role of the context is unlike any of the three familiar roles which context can play: supplementation of ellipses, removal of ambiguity, and determination of indexical content according to relevant rules. And second, he says that it is hard to see how any aspect of the context accessible to the hearer could guide the hearer of a propositional attitude token to the mode which, according to the Hidden Indexical theory, the speaker of the token has in mind. I shall consider these points in turn.

In support of the first claim -- i.e. that the alleged role of context in the Hidden Indexical theory must be utterly unfamiliar -- Devitt notes: (i) that the alleged role of context is unlike the determination of indexical content according to relevant rules in that, if anything directs the hearer of an attitude ascription to a particular aspect of the context in order to discover the

intended mode, it is not a convention associated with the ascription; (ii) that attitude ascriptions are not ambiguous; and (iii) that attitude ascriptions are not elliptical (and, in any case, in general, the mode that the context is supposed to supply is not obvious in the context). However, as I noted earlier, it seems to me that alleged role of context in the Hidden Indexical theory need not be in the least unfamiliar: all that is required is that there be ways in which particular modes can be raised to salience in given contexts, either by features of the prior conversation, or by physical features of the context itself. (Roughly, the same kind of story can be told about: domains of quantification; the content of many indexicals and demonstratives (“he”, “it”, “that”); the referents of ‘incomplete’ definite descriptions; disambiguation of names; etc.) There may be relevant rules which apply -- “the mode in question is one which is salient in the context” (c.f. “‘he’ refers to a male who is salient in the context”) -- but the rules are “incomplete” (unlike those for some indexicals, e.g. “I”). Moreover, despite the evident similarities, it seems that it would be a bit of a stretch to describe the processes in question as ‘removal of ambiguity’ or ‘supplementation of ellipsis’. Yet -- as I argued earlier -- what this seems to show is just the Devitt hasn’t given an adequate and sufficiently detailed taxonomy of the ways in which context enters into the determination of semantic content. Of course, I don’t have a complete account of score-keeping in a language game to hand; but I see no reason why friends of the Hidden Indexical theory should not think that the role of context which their theory requires is strange and unfamiliar.

In support of the second claim -- i.e. that it is hard to see how any aspect of the context accessible to the hearer could guide the hearer of a propositional attitude token to the mode which, according to the Hidden Indexical theory, the speaker of the token has in mind -- Devitt says: “It is presumably not the case that *each* of “Ralph’s murderer is insane”, “Ralph believes that Big Felix is insane”, “Ralph believes that the most successful mobster is insane”, and “Ralph believes that the man at the bar is insane” could be used in *any* context to ascribe

*any* of the modes of referring to Big Felix, for then the hearer's task would clearly be impossible. In some way, the context must limit the ascriptions that can be used for a mode, so that the hearer can infer the mode from the ascription in the context. It is hard to see what the limitations could be. At least, the Hidden Indexical theory is seriously incomplete without an account of the limitations". (p.56) Perhaps a useful comparison can be drawn here with the indexical "he". It is not the case that it can be used in *any* context to refer to *any* male, for then the hearer's task would obviously be impossible. However, in this case, the missing constraint is obvious: "he" can only be used to refer to a male who is salient in the context (either as a result of prior conversation, or because of physical features of the context, or for some other similar reason). But, according to the Hidden Indexical theorist, parallel considerations apply in the case of modes: the relevant limitation is that the mode must be salient in the context (either as a result of prior conversation, or because of physical features of the context, or for some other similar reason). Of course, this is merely the starting point for a genuine theory of the contextual selection of modes -- but it is enough to meet Devitt's criticism. It could yet turn out that no theory of the desired kind can be made to work -- but if that is so, it is for reasons which Devitt does not discuss.

In sum, then: I do not think that there is a particularly pressing problem about the accessibility of modes in contexts. Certainly, Devitt does not give a good argument for the conclusion that there is such a problem. Moreover, there does seem to be motivation for the Hidden Indexical theory in relevant examples. So I conclude that Devitt has not shown that the Hidden Indexical theory is subject to difficulties which his own theory does not face. Furthermore, I also conclude that Devitt has not shown that his own theory does better than the Hidden Indexical theory in accounting for the examples which have been discussed in the literature. (It is worth noting that a proponent of a Hidden Indexical theory need not deny that the "early Quinean" taxonomy can be used to sort tokens of propositional attitude ascriptions -- i.e. a

proponent of a Hidden Indexical theory can agree that tokens are either transparent, or rapport transparent, or opaque. However, what such theorists will deny is that the mere classification “opaque” cuts finely enough to do all of the explanatory work which one requires. In particular, such theorists will deny that there is just one mode which is *the* meaning in the case of opaque ascriptions.)

## V

I think that there are examples which show that, in fact, Devitt’s theory does worse than Hidden Indexical theories. In these examples, the same propositional attitude ascriptions are tokened in different contexts -- and the best explanation of the changing behaviour of the ascriptions as the contexts vary seems to be that the modes associated with relevant singular terms are varying.

Consider the following case (from Oppy (1993)): Joe turns up for his first day of work and is introduced to his boss “Robert”. On the basis of Robert’s appearance, conversation, etc., Joe forms the opinion that Robert is very conservative and abstemious. After work, Joe goes to the pub, where he is regaled with stories about a hard-living colleague whom everyone refers to as “Bruce”. Before long, Joe tires of these stories, and so he says: “Enough of these stories about Bruce. Tell me about Robert”. There is a somewhat pained silence, and then one amongst the assembled crowd states the obvious fact: *Joe hasn’t realised that, appearances notwithstanding, Robert is a party animal*. So far, this is a fairly conventional “puzzle case”. But now for the twist. Joe obtained his job as a replacement for Jeff. When Jeff turned up for his first day of work, he was introduced to his boss “Bruce”. On the basis of Bruce’s

appearance, conversation, etc., Jeff formed the opinion that Bruce is very conservative and abstemious. After work, Jeff went to the pub, where he was regaled with stories about a hard-living colleague whom everyone referred to as “Robert”. Before long, Jeff tired of these stories, and so he said: “Enough of these stories about Robert. Tell me about Bruce”. There was a somewhat pained silence, and then one amongst the assembled crowd -- the same one as in the case of Joe! -- stated the obvious fact: *Jeff hadn't realised that, appearances notwithstanding, Bruce is a party animal.* (To fill out the story a little more, we might suppose that the patterns of use of the names “Robert” and “Bruce” vary together on a daily basis -- when the boss has a day on which he calls himself “Robert”, his employees refer to him as “Bruce”, and *vice versa*. However, I don't think that we need any such assumption to make the points which I wish to make.)

In this case, it seems reasonable to suggest that it is the prior use of the names over a relatively short interval of time -- roughly, the course of current conversations -- which serves to establish their connections to modes of presentation. Putting the case a little impressionistically: Joe associates one character profile with the name “Robert”, and a different profile with the name “Bruce”. Moreover, these character profiles -- or, at least, a rough approximation thereof -- are salient to all the people in the pub after Joe makes his ignorant request. The modes which are associated with the names “Robert” and “Bruce” -- and which are responsible for the truth of “Joe believes that Bruce is a party animal” and the falsity of “Joe believes that Robert is a party animal” -- are intimately related to these character profiles, or to some salient features thereof. However, because Jeff associates the character profiles with the names in the reverse way to the way in which Joe does this, and because of the way in which these character profiles become salient to the relevant people in the pub, the association between the names and the modes is also reversed. Thus, we seem to have a vindication of the Hidden Indexical theory: modes are radically context-sensitive after

all.

One option, in response to this argument, is to gerrymander the notion of a mode: there are bound to be ways of counting modes in which it is not the modes themselves which turn out to be context-sensitive. However, if it turns out that modes have parts, that these parts contribute differentially to the determination of truth-values, and that this differential determination proceeds in a way which is radically context-sensitive, then the alleged vindication of the Hidden Indexical theory will remain. Since there seems to be no other plausible avenue of response, I am drawn to the conclusion that the Hidden Indexical theory is better supported by the evidence than is Devitt's own "early Quinean" theory. (Of course, it might be that my example is better treated, after the fashion of direct reference theorists, by exportation to pragmatics. It would require a quite different, and much stronger, argument to support the claim that a Hidden Indexical theory is the best theory of propositional attitude ascriptions *tout court*.)

## VI

Devitt's treatment of the "post-Quinean puzzling cases" suggests that he would disagree with my judgement about the case described in the previous section. He comments on some of Kripke's cases -- in particular, the case of "Pierre" and the case of "Paderowski" -- are particularly suggestive. In connection with the case of Pierre, he writes: "On the basis of his assertions, we feel entitled to say both of the following: (21) Pierre believes that London is pretty; (22) Pierre believes that London is not pretty. Indeed, we are entitled on the assumption that the meaning ascribed by "London" in (21) and (22) is the property of

referring to London by the disjunctive mode, for, on that assumption, (21) and (22) are both true. Pierre is unusual in not having unified his modes for the two names, and so the meaning ascribed is not fine grained enough to explain his behaviour. And if we want to advert to the meanings that will do the explanatory job, we have to resort to a complex nonstandard ascription, instead of (22), for example: (23) Pierre believes that London, qua city he is living in, is not pretty. Perhaps not. Perhaps in this situation .. the context of (22) “supplies the qua”; (22) has a hidden-indexical element; and (22) is elliptical for (23). Suppose this is so. It still does not support the Hidden Indexical theory. It does not undermine our view that a t-clause containing “London” usually specifies a disjunctive mode and is not elliptical. More importantly, it does not give any reason to believe that the t-clause might, given the right context, specify a demonstrative or descriptive mode of referring to London. What it does support is a minor modification of my Quinean theory. In unusual situations like Pierre’s, the context may “narrow down” the mode ascribed by a name from a disjunctive mode to one of the disjuncts.” (pp.77-78) And, in connection with the case of Paderowski, he writes: “[W]e cannot describe Peter’s mistake, as we could Pierre’s, with a simple standard ascription of an identity belief like: (24) Pierre believes that London is not Londres. We have to resort to a complex non-standard form like: (28) Peter believes that Paderowski, qua pianist, is not Paderowski, qua politician. .. Perhaps, once again, this is too hasty. Perhaps (19) [Peter believes that Paderowski had musical talent] and (20) [Peter believes that Paderowski had no musical talent] can be taken as elliptical sentences with the context “supplying the qua”. But if so, once again, there is no support for the Hidden Indexical theory; there is simply support for a minor modification of my Quinean theory.” (p.80)

I find these remarks very puzzling. Remember that the characteristic thesis of Hidden Indexical theories -- i.e. the claim which Devitt insisted that he wished to deny -- is that there are indefinitely many different meanings which some content clauses, not containing radically

context-sensitive devices such as indexicals, can be used to ascribe. But, if there are indefinitely many different “qua-clauses” which could be supplied from context as context varies, then Hidden Indexical theories are vindicated. Moreover, it is easy to see how to tell indefinitely many different stories which require indefinitely many different “qua-clauses” to be attached to names like “London” and “Paderowski”. So, *pace* Devitt, these “post-Quinean puzzling cases” do provide support for Hidden Indexical theories.

True enough, these examples do not “undermine our view that a t-clause containing “London” usually specifies a disjunctive mode and is not elliptical”. It may be -- as I speculated in Oppy (1992) -- that, usually, there is a default mode which gets ascribed, but which can be overthrown by defeating contextual factors. However, this claim is perfectly compatible with a Hidden Indexical theory -- i.e. it is perfectly compatible with the claim that there are indefinitely many different modes which could be associated with a given proper name. In general, there are indefinitely many different identifying descriptions which could be used to pick out an object; and, in general, any two of these identifying descriptions could be the ones which feature in a “puzzle case”. Of course, as Devitt in effect points out, most of the time, “puzzle cases” don’t actually arise. But the present point is to provide an adequate account of linguistic practice when confronted by situations in which “puzzle cases” do occur. And -- as I have already argued -- it seems pretty clear that Hidden Indexical theories do better than “early Quinean” theories in accounting for that part of our linguistic practice.

Devitt’s talk about the role of context in “narrowing down” disjunctive modes is also puzzling, especially given the thinness of the positive account of modes to which he commits himself in the present work. A proponent of a Hidden Indexical theory *might* be prepared to allow that there are “disjunctive” modes, which contain indefinitely many disjuncts (corresponding to the indefinitely many identifying descriptions which truly apply to the

objects in question). Furthermore, a proponent of a Hidden Indexical theory *might* be prepared to say that one role of context can be to “narrow down” these disjunctive modes in various ways. But, in saying these things, the Hidden Indexical theorists would not be shifting to Devitt’s “early Quinean” position -- i.e. the Hidden Indexical theorists would nonetheless be continuing to maintain that that there are indefinitely many different meanings which some content clauses, not containing radically context-sensitive devices such as indexicals, can be used to ascribe. (Of course, Hidden Indexical theorists might also prefer not to describe their views in these terms.)

In sum: it seems to me that Devitt shifts the goalposts during the course of his discussion. Given his initial characterisation, the theory which he ultimately opts for is actually a Hidden Indexical theory -- i.e. he has followed Quine in abandoning the “early Quinean” theory. On the other hand, if Hidden Indexical theories are required to deny the claim that there is usually a context-insensitive default mode which gets ascribed, then, while Devitt’s theory is not a Hidden Indexical theory, nor are any other plausible theories which get classified under that name. Moreover, on this latter characterisation, even “early Quinean” theories can be radically context-sensitive -- and, since it is this issue of context-sensitivity which primarily interests us, it turns out that Devitt’s “early Quinean” theory is actually rather similar to that endorsed by the later Quine.

## APPENDIX

Devitt has been a long-standing opponent of the idea that propositional attitude ascriptions are radically context-dependent; and, in particular, he has been a long-standing opponent of the

idea that propositional attitude ascriptions are radically context-dependent because of the way in which they are related to other radically context-dependent ascriptions, most notably ascriptions of “knowing who”. In the present work he claims, for example, that “Quine has come to favour a context-dependency view of the examples which he formerly thought of as transparent, renouncing many of the claims on which my Quinean theory is based. .. He is driven to this by two assumptions: That any transparent attitude ascription requires rapport and that the rapport required must be explained in terms of the context-relative notion knowing who. I think that both these assumptions are wrong.” (p.52n62) Since I think that the case for the radical context-dependency of propositional attitude ascriptions can be made without referring to knowing who, I don’t need to defend the Quinean assumptions in order to make my case. However, I don’t think that Devitt gets the relationship between transparent attitude ascriptions, rapport, and knowing who right. And I think that one might be able to get a good argument for the context dependency of propositional attitude ascriptions from something like the materials with which Quine works. I shall end this paper by saying a little more about these matters.

I take for granted the widely accepted claim that knowing who ascriptions are radically context-sensitive. I also take for granted the perhaps more controversial claim that rapport ascriptions are radically context-sensitive. Whether one should be said to know who someone is depends upon standards of assessment which vary from context to context; and whether one should be said to be en rapport with a particular object also depends upon standards of assessment which vary from context to context. In some contexts, mere possession of a single attributive identifying description may be enough for knowing who and/or being en rapport; in other contexts, possession of a massive mental file may be insufficient. When the man dying from gunshot wounds whispers to you “the man who shot me also killed my uncle”, there can be a sense in which you now know who shot him (even if, by more

demanding standards, you don't know who shot his uncle). Likewise, when you survey the numerous clues left at the murder scene, there can be a sense in which you are en rapport with the killer, even though, by more demanding standards, your epistemic connection to the killer is fairly tenuous. On the other hand, even though you have lived next door to Samuel Clemens for twenty years, and know him intimately -- though you have no idea that he is an author, let alone a successful author -- it can be the case that you don't know who Mark Twain is. And, likewise, one can count as en rapport with Mark Twain relative to some projects -- e.g. gathering information about one's neighbours -- but not en rapport with Mark Twain relative to other projects -- e.g. assessing the merits of various authors. Put simply, the point is just that knowing who and being en rapport with are mediated by modes: so, one's instantiation of these relations can depend upon which modes are at issue.

I also take for granted the fact that it is possible to object to an attitude ascription of the form "A believes that x is F" by saying "A doesn't even know who x is". Does Jerry believe that Clinton is president of the U.S.? No, Jerry has never even heard of Clinton. Does Fido believe that this is a juicy bone? No, Fido doesn't even know what a bone is. Etc. This seems to be at least *prima facie* evidence that something like knowing who and/or rapport can be required for the truth of attitude ascriptions. Moreover, since knowing who and rapport are context-sensitive, it seems plausible to think that this context-sensitivity would carry over to associated propositional attitude ascriptions. (This point could be driven home by examples which use Devitt's "qua" constructions.) So it seems to me that an argument for the context-sensitivity of propositional attitude ascriptions can be constructed from Quinean materials.

Note, however, that this argument does not insist that knowing who and rapport are *requirements* for propositional attitude ascriptions (c.f. the argument which Devitt attributes to Quine). Even if the context-sensitivity of the attitudes, knowing who and rapport are all due

to modes, it is not obvious that it must be the case that they all exhibit the same kind of context-sensitivity in every context. Perhaps they do.<sup>3</sup> But, on the other hand, perhaps it can be the case that there is a single context in which, e.g., one is counted as not knowing who someone is even though one is also held to have beliefs about them. (Consider the case of the man dying from gunshot wounds. Suppose that Big Felix is the killer of the dying man's uncle. Then, in one context one might say: The dying man believes that Big Felix shot his uncle; but he doesn't know who Big Felix is. But, in another context, one might say: The dying man doesn't believe that Big Felix shot his uncle; he doesn't even know who Big Felix is.) If, as seems plausible, the standards -- the modes -- for attitude ascriptions, knowing who and rapport *can* come apart, then the premises of the Quinean argument are indeed false. However, those premises are much stronger than the premises which are needed to establish the desired conclusion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In my dissertation, I defended that view that knowing who and rapport are requirements for propositional attitude ascriptions. I now think that this was a mistake: the arguments were no good, there are compelling counterexamples, and, in any case, a defence of the radical context-sensitivity of propositional attitude ascriptions can proceed without the assumption that there are such requirements.

<sup>4</sup> Note that, in giving the present argument, I am not disagreeing with the criticisms which Devitt made of Evans' views about the connection between knowing who and the attitudes. Evans held the necessary requirement view. Devitt holds the 'necessarily no connection' view. I hold that there can be a connection, that there can be no connection, and that whether there is a connection depends upon features of the conversational context.