BOOK REVIEW

José Luis Bermúdez, Matheus Valente, and Víctor M. Verdejo (eds.)
SHARING THOUGHTS: PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND COMMUNICATION
Oxford University Press, 2025
ISBN-13: 978-0192864925
Hardcover: € 96.44

Valentine Simpson [1]

[1] University of Valencia, Spain

There are books that advance an idea, a theory, or a framework. There are also books, especially edited volumes, that are able to cover certain target issues from various angles. Then, there are books that function to push a whole debate forward towards new horizons. *Sharing Thoughts* is one such book. As an edited volume goes, it sweeps across a range of closely related topics, such as those of communication, intersubjective thought or thinking, same-saying and same-thinking from various angles. Some of these points of entry are well known—even classic, one may say—such as the continuing feud between semantic externalists and semantic internalists; some other angles are newer, such as the enthusiasm over the prospects of the so-called Relationist approach to thought and meaning—which in this volume takes the spotlight; and some are clearly exceptional, stretching the boundaries of what is traditionally taken to be involved in intersubjective thought or communication, such as inquiries into the mechanisms of thought transmission *via* musical language or musical pieces.

The book opens with an overview of the landscape in which the rest of the book operates, written by (two out of three of) the editors: Víctor Verdejo and Matheus Valente, with José Luis Bermúdez as the third editor. In the introduction, they make note of the extent to which the Fregean tradition underpins much of this landscape: individual thought as the basis for rationality, and shared thought as the basis for communication. But when orthodoxy rests, an opponent rises to give challenge to the incumbent view. The challenger in this volume is the Relationist, inspired by Kit Fine's (2007)—the other of the two Fs, as the editors jokingly put it—work on

© 2026 Valentine Simpson
Correspondence: valensimpson@gmail.com

some of the core puzzles of meaning and thought (Frege's puzzle taking centre-stage). Both the Fregean and the Finean (read Relationist) may hold on to the pre-theoretical idea that there is thought sharing in the literal sense, that we can firmly establish that two subjects' thoughts are the same, or share a content. Papers in the first part of the volume, *Sameness of Thought and Beyond*, take up the challenge of showing how this may be done. In opposition, papers in part two, *Coordination and Thinking the Same-ish*, depart from this potentially naïve view of thought sharing and instead attempt to navigate a less demanding road. The notion of coordination—to which, again, both the Fregean and the Relationist stake a claim—emerges as an umbrella under which phenomena like communication and (dis)agreement may yet be explained when identity of thought between speakers falls short.

This review will focus on chapters concerned with these themes, and so will skip over some that do not: the latter include Christopher Peacocke's investigation into music's capacity for communication (chapter 1), José Luís Bermúdez's discussion on rationality and framing effects (chapter 3), Imogen Dickie's account of communication that disentangles it from traditional knowledge-transmission based views (chapter 6), and Guy Longworth's exploration of collective thinking (chapter 7).

Chapter 2 sees Simon Prosser defend Relationism from two distinct challenges: the first, accounting for the phenomenon of cognitive dynamics, the second, accommodating the action-guiding nature of egocentric (indexical) thoughts. In opposition to "intrinsicalist" theories of thought individuation[1] (the Fregean's is a typical example), according to which the individuation of a thought hinges on some inner epistemic feature of the representation, the Relationist view instead has it that thoughts may differ in these features, but can be shared if certain relations hold. The key relation is epistemic transparency, which allows a subject to "trade on identity" between representations, without mediating identity statements. Together with a distinction between (explicitly) stated and (implicitly) manifested beliefs, this allows the Relationist to explain, without the Fregean's difficulties, the phenomenon of cognitive dynamics, or thoughts expressed with distinct indexicals. Prosser then proposes understanding egocentric thought through the epistemological notion of first-person redundancy, to answer the second challenge: when one entertains an egocentric thought, they do not represent themselves explicitly as one element of the thought's relata, one needs no further warrant about their own situation (spatial, temporal, or otherwise), beyond

[1] Also found in this volume for the Schroeters, they are resemblance-based theories of meaning; for Goodman, it is simply Fregeanism.

being in it. Psychological explanation will therefore need to be sensitive to which thoughts are entertained egocentrically or non-egocentrically.

When you entertain a train of thought about an individual or object, the fact that your successive thoughts pertain to the same topic seems obvious, rationally incontrovertible, and epistemically basic. In chapter 5, Laura and François Schroeter build a theory of meaning on this *appearance of de jure sameness* (ADJS). The basic unit of semantic interpretation is a representational tradition demarcated by sub-personal mental files which generate ADJS relations synchronically, diachronically, and interpersonally. Rather than requiring shared reference-fixing criteria, as Fregeans do, speakers operate by presuming that ADJS is veridical, and seek justifiable interpretations of their tradition. To defend from the problem of semantic drift, they introduce disambiguation: traditions get partitioned so early and later uses refer to distinct things. By way of discussing slow-switching Twin-Earth cases, the Schroeters also break from the dominant view that concepts are just causal-explanatory tools meant to guarantee "Synchronic Transparency":[2] a thinker cannot mistakenly conflate two distinct concepts within a single conscious episode of reasoning. They argue that this entails a destruction of a subject's diachronic rationality.

Chapter 8 is Sarah Sawyer's response to Joey Pollock's chapter 14, the book's closing chapter. For this reason, I find it helpful to present both chapters together, in reverse order, for dialectical coherence.

Pollock defends an internalist, radical holism of concepts. Because this view implies that thinkers can't share the same thought, she rejects the traditional "shared content" model of disagreement (which Sawyer defends), proposing instead a Graded Disagreement model based on the similarity of agents' individual conceptual networks. She argues that her externalist opponents face a structurally similar problem as the holist. They must admit gaps between shared content and an individual's idiosyncratic understanding of that content. In turn, characterising an agent's understanding requires tracing a rich network of interlocking background beliefs. Thus, even for the conceptual atomist, understanding is itself significantly holistic. As a result, they too must adopt a graded approach to disagreement. Pollock concludes that all theories of meaning ultimately require a structurally similar holistic model to make sense of everyday communication and (dis)agreement.

Sawyer answers: externalism provides the tools to *absolutely* share thoughts, despite individuals' idiosyncratic or incomplete understandings

[2] For defences of synchronic transparency, see Recanati, or Prosser, both in this volume.

of those thoughts. She emphasises the distinction between shared concepts (individuated by relations to objective properties) and individual conceptions (the set of beliefs associated with a concept). Because concept possession is externally determined, two people can share the same concept while holding drastically different, or even radically false, conceptions. Sawyer rejects Pollock's claim that externalists must adopt a graded view of understanding. Instead, they simply represent absolute agreement on one proposition, but absolute disagreement on unvoiced background propositions. Finally, Sawyer turns the offensive against Pollock. Because internalism completely precludes shared thought, it also precludes shared reference. Speakers cannot actually agree or disagree about anything, because there is no shared subject matter. Externalism, by contrast, uses shared concepts to provide representational anchors to the world. This successfully preserves the intuition that there is genuine disagreement about a shared world.

When placed side-by-side, it is tempting to wonder whether Pollock's and Sawyer's models are merely notational variants. Both authors are staring at the exact same phenomenon: two agents failing to coordinate their actions despite using the same words. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, both theoretical machineries successfully predict and explain the miscoordination. If Pollock's graded similarity of understanding maps perfectly onto Sawyer's charting of absolute (dis)agreements on background beliefs, are they just speaking different languages to describe the same cognitive reality? To truly adjudicate between the two views, we will probably have to look beyond their local explanations of coordination and examine the ramifications their frameworks have on broader philosophical debates. For instance, ironically, both authors accuse each other of lacking theoretical parsimony. Pollock, on her side, claims that the externalist's notion of "Disagreement in Content" becomes an "idle theoretical posit" (p. 330) motivated only by a background metaphysical assumption. Sawyer's counter is that, as opposed to the radical holist, the externalist doesn't need to build a second level of graded disagreement, as she can straightforwardly explain degrees of understanding and disagreement on the basis of absolutely (not) shared thought.

Ultimately, deciding between Pollock and Sawyer requires us to weigh what we value more in a theory of meaning. If our priority is to perfectly capture the internal cognitive machinery that rationalises an agent's behaviour from the inside, Pollock's graded holism offers a highly sensitive, if idiosyncratic, tool. But if our priority is to preserve the continuity of inquiry, objectivity, and our ability to anchor our thoughts to a shared external world, Sawyer shows that the externalist shared-thought view remains an indispensable foundation. It may well be that, as the

Schroeters notice in their chapter, there may be various ways of "individuating fine-grained representational state types that might deserve the name 'concept'" (p. 120).

The remaining chapters,[3] comprising part two of the volume, follow-up on the core topic of the book as pursued by Prosser's and the Schroeters' earlier chapters: coordination as understood by Russellians, Fregeans, and Relationists. Crucially, this second half constitutes a move away from the Fregean standard of pursuing accounts of robust thought identity. Alternative accounts, some Fregean, some not, explore the cracks in the idea of full-blown thought sharing and pave new ways of understanding intersubjectivity.

François Recanati's chapter 9 delves into the question of whether Fregeans ought to modify their accounts to include senses that go beyond the so-called "Frege boundary". Intersubjective phenomena like communication and (dis)agreement, as well as diachronic belief change seem to force the Fregean to provide a view that explains sameness and difference of sense across these cases. Recanati rejects the Fregean's appeal to the Campbellian notion of *trading on identity*, on the grounds that "trading" inferences are fundamentally synchronic and intrapersonal. All that is needed is a composite mode of presentation combining distinct information channels which bring together perception and memory (in diachronic cases) or different subjects' perspectives (in interpersonal, joint attention cases), not different senses related through trading on identity. Recanati then shows how, even if an extended Fregean criterion *may* be devised, it may lead to a fatal loss of transparency from the subject's perspective, which is antagonistic to what Fregean senses are all about.

Rachel Goodman contributes a chapter (chapter 10) much more sanguine with the Fregean position. By attending to two very different sorts of cases from the literature—Brian Loar's (1976) case of lucky co-reference and (a modification of) Kit Fine's Paderewski case of transitivity failure—Goodman challenges the Fregean on grounds of dialectical instability. The Fregean explains the misunderstanding in Loar's case *via* a difference between senses. However, in the Paderewski case, rational engagement also seems to fail despite an apparent sameness of sense. Whatever alternative explanations the Fregean may provide, Goodman tells us, will amount to special pleading. Goodman contends that a form of neo-Russellianism can provide a principled explanation along traditional Russellian lines of co-reference, plus the addition of "transactional requirements" (such as knowledge of co-reference). Her view is also

[3] Together with Pollock's, just discussed.

superior to Relationism, she claims. The latter view's reliance on Campbell's famous regress argument is misguided. Goodman argues that the argument has no applicability to the interpersonal case, beyond intrapersonal cases. Hence, Russellianism is, conclusively, superior to both Fregeanism and Relationism as a view of communication.

As if in direct response, Manuel García-Carpintero (chapter 11) sets forth a Fregean account of coordination where singular reference involves metalinguistic, reference-fixing presuppositions.[4] Coordination occurs when expressions jointly trigger the presupposition that they corefer (if they refer at all). Crucially, he uses this to reject the "standard" Fregean assumption that coordination requires sameness of sense, which allows García-Carpintero to sidestep Goodman's and the Schroeters' charges against Fregeanism/resemblance models. He defends also from criticism that merely presupposing co-reference is too weak for coordination. García-Carpintero claims there is a constitutive knowledge norm for "flat out" presupposing. Therefore, in central cases, speakers *do* know this conditional coreference. However, coordination can still occur in defective cases where knowledge is absent: linguistic performance has violated its constitutive norms and is therefore "wrong". In confusion cases, the coreference presupposition is still locutionarily present, which successfully explains why the speakers have the epistemic "appearance" or impression of coordination. However, because the best metasemantic account reveals that the speakers are not illocutionarily committed to the norms of that presupposition, actual coreference fails.

García-Carpintero's Fregean account in terms of presuppositions of co-reference is particularly interesting when contrasted with Prosser's own Relationist account of coordination, which is also based around presuppositions.[5] It is worth pausing to wonder what it means, beyond the particulars and differences of their respective accounts, for presuppositions to form the basis of a Fregean account on the one hand, and a Relationist story on the other. Whilst García-Carpintero agrees with the Schroeters that their appearance of *de jure* sameness or his presupposition of co-reference may be fallible, Prosser flat out rejects this possibility. It seems interesting to me that García-Carpintero's Fregean account can share so much with the Schroeters' Relationist/connectedness model, while these accounts differ in such a crucial respect with Prosser's (also) Relationist account. García-Carpintero does in fact wonder whether his bickering with the Schroeters is merely terminological or whether his account should be seen

[4] Understanding presuppositions under the Stalnakerian view, as requirements on the conversational common ground.
[5] The account is put forward in Prosser (2019), not in this volume's chapter, although mention of it is found in footnote 3 of his chapter.

more as a "third view, in between their "matching" and "binding" models, consistent with fundamental Fregean tenets" (p. 249). These questions may reflect the difficulty intrinsic to providing a unified treatment of the Relationist position. Conversely, one may see Sharing Thoughts as illustrating the richness and variety of this family of views, as well as the ongoing debate and exchange between the rival views of Fregeanism, Russellianism, and Relationism.

Aidan Gray's chapter 12 leans fully into the idea that coordination is not a transitive relation. This leads Gray to argue that we must redefine coordination as representationally-required weak conditional co-reference (if both terms refer, they corefer).[6] Because standard predicate logic cannot model intransitive rational relations, Gray proposes formalising this within a neutral free logic using Strawson Entailment (SE). The rest of the chapter sees the author deploy this formal model. Under SE, an argument is valid if no model makes the premises true and the conclusion false—effectively taking for granted that the presuppositions of the conclusion are satisfied. SE is naturally intransitive, meaning it perfectly captures the desired rational relations: a thinker can trade on identity locally between directly coordinated terms, but cannot chain these inferences transitively across uncoordinated ones. Sameness of content breaks down, resulting in a lack of a simple, equivalence-class answer to whether two subjects are "thinking the same". We must therefore abandon this simple idea in favour of "thinking the same-ish".

In his chapter 13, Andrea Onofri develops a view of communication based on a notion of coordination that departs from the Relationist's ordinary toolbox. Onofri's view, quite Russellian in spirit, rests solely on the transmission of truth-conditional content. To solve Loar cases (the Fregean's weapon against Russellianism), Onofri proposes we look at the epistemic states of interlocutors. Bringing in the Stalnakerian concept of the context-set (the set of possible worlds compatible with what the conversational participants presuppose), communicative success hinges on the sharing of truth-conditions across the full set of worlds in the context set, which in turn depends on the presence or absence of certain identity facts known by the speakers and which are relevant to reference-fixing across worlds.

As I hope to have adequately conveyed, beyond the particulars of each chapter and the accounts set forth in them, the book highlights a very general and fundamental discussion over the status of interpersonal sameness. Recall how Prosser attempts to provide an account of the

[6] This is also a line taken by Recanati, both in this volume and elsewhere (2020).

sameness of thoughts involving different indexicals based on the relation of epistemic transparency, or trading-on-identity. Recall, further, that Recanati's chapter presents a straightforward argument against the possibility of such thought-identity in the case of cognitive dynamics. If successful, Recanati's argument spells trouble for any view of the sort Prosser defends. Recanati's lesson is that strict identity occurs solely intrasubjectively and synchronically. This lesson is picked up by Goodman, who presents yet another argument intending to prove the futility of extending said trading relations to intersubjective cases of communication. While armed with their compelling anti-Fregean arguments, Relationists will here find a pool of concerns levelled against their quickly growing family of views.

As a final observation, those particularly interested in the question over essential indexicality and its shareability/communicability will not find here the promised land.[7] Even in the case of Prosser's contribution, the one most straightforwardly tackling the topic, it should be seen more as an exercise of the Relationist's explanatory power in the face of a particular phenomenon, than as an indexicality-illuminating venture. Both Gray and the Schroeters explicitly dismiss indexicals in dealing with their respective subject matters. The former, having written on the topic, recognises that indexicals seem to elude a Relationist or coordination-based treatment. The Schroeters's connectedness model is designed with strict concept identity in mind, which stands in contrast with what they call *relaxed* concepts, which indeed comprise indexicals and with which their account isn't concerned. It is perhaps surprising, given Prosser's proximity to their view, in his chapter and elsewhere (2019), that they would take different attitudes when it comes to indexical expressions and thoughts.

To close: this is, if anything, a magnificent volume rich in philosophical activity. The chapters dialogue with each other both openly and more covertly, but always in ways that push the boundaries of the discussion further: old theories are revisited and revamped, while new theories are deepened and delineated. On a volume entitled *Sharing Thoughts*, it doesn't get any more sharing than that!

References

Bermúdez, José Luis, Matheus Valente, and Víctor M. Verdejo, eds. 2025. *Sharing Thoughts: Philosophical Perspectives on*

[7] They are much better situated to find it in García-Carpintero and Torre (2016).

Intersubjectivity and Communication. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192864925.001.0001

García-Carpintero, Manuel, and Stephan Torre, eds. 2016. *About Oneself: De Se Thought and Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fine, Kit. 2007. *Semantic Relationism*. Blackwell Publishing.

Loar, Brian. 1976. The Semantics of Singular Terms. *Philosophical Studies* 30 (6): 353–377.

Prosser, Simon. 2019. "Shared modes of presentation." *Mind and Language* 34 (4): 465–482.

Recanati, François. 2020. Coreference De Jure. In *Singular Thought and Mental Files*, edited by Rachel Goodman, James Genone, Nick Kroll, pp. 161–186. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CC BY NC