A so-called ‘Russellian Thought’ is a belief which essentially involves an object it is of or about in the sense that, if that object did not exist, then the belief would not be a belief. But are there any such things as Russellian Thoughts? Some philosophers, whom I shall refer to as ‘Russellians’, think there are. I disagree. The main purpose of this paper is to explain why. In the course of doing so I touch on some important general considerations concerning the nature of belief and the attribution and specification of intentional content.

One thing which is not at issue between the Russellian and myself is that when someone believes something of an (external) object — that it has a certain property or satisfies a certain condition — then he is in a (narrow) mental state which could exist without the object and without his standing in the relation to the object which makes that state a belief about it. The dispute between us concerns the issue of whether such a mental state, which I shall refer to as a ‘Z-state’, would be a belief even if the object did not exist. I say it would. My opponent says that under certain conditions it would not. In Section I I briefly and sympathetically rehearse what I take to be the most impressive arguments for his position. In Section II I give the basic arguments for mine. Although these argu-
ments are fairly obvious, I think they are sufficiently impressive to suggest that the case for Russellian Thoughts must be flawed. In Section III, which completes the paper, I offer an account of what is wrong with it.

I

The foundation of the case for Russellian Thoughts is the claim that there are 'demonstrative beliefs' and, with them, 'demonstrative Z-states' which are not reducible to non-demonstrative beliefs and Z-states. Roughly, a demonstrative belief is (i) a belief which is most perspicuously expressed by a sentence involving a true demonstrative such as 'this' or 'that' (with or without a qualifying common noun or common noun phrase), and (ii) a belief which itself involves non-descriptive perceptual (or perception-based) reference to the object it is about, or would be about if the object existed. (This qualification is necessary to avoid begging the question in favor of Russellian Thoughts.) The demonstrative term in a sentential utterance expressing a demonstrative belief would of course denote the object, if any, which the belief is about. It would also express the perceptual reference involved in the Z-state. I will refer to the feature of a demonstrative Z-state which is the vehicle of this perceptual reference as a 'demonstrative idea'. The precise nature of demonstrative ideas is not our present concern. What we must grant is that every demonstrative Z-state, whether or not it is a belief, involves at least one demonstrative idea.3

In this paper I do not consider the arguments for and against demonstrative Z-states and beliefs, but simply assume with the Russellian that they exist. The main burden of the paper is to show that even if they do exist there is still good reason to reject Russellian Thoughts. But let us first look at what I take to be the two main arguments in favor of them.

The first of these arguments is that, if there is no object corresponding to a demonstrative idea involved in a Z-state, then that Z-state cannot be attributed to the agent concerned by means of a belief sentence of the form 'x believes that P' or 'x believes of y that P'. Suppose, e.g., that Fred is in his garden on a moonlit night and has a visual experience which causes (and perhaps in part constitutes) a Z-state in him which he would naturally express by the utterance

That is a frog.

1 Readers who think the term 'demonstrative idea' begs the question against Russellian Thoughts may substitute some other term — e.g., 'demonstrative quasi-idea' or 'demonstrative schmidea' — without affecting any of the arguments below.
Let us also assume that Fred's visual experience on this occasion is not caused in the normal way by something before his eyes, but by a strange variation in stellar radiation which quite bizarrely results in the combination of neural firings underlying or constituting his experience. It is clear that in this case Fred's demonstrative idea does not apply to anything. Thus if his Z-state is a belief, there is nothing to serve as the object it is about. And because of this it is impossible to report his Z-state by means of a true belief sentence such as any of the following:

1. Fred believes that that is a frog,
2. Fred believes that that thing on the lawn (or: that leaf) is a frog,
3. Fred believes that thing on the lawn (or: that frog) that it is a frog.

For due to reference failure none of these is true, and the same applies to any suitable alternative.

However, since Fred presumably possesses the minimal rationality required to have beliefs, it is no doubt true that

4. Fred believes that there is a frog before him.

But this does not show that the particular Z-state which we are interested in is a belief, for this Z-state, if it is a belief, has singular content, whilst the belief content attributed to Fred by (4) is not singular but existential. Apparently, then, there is no straightforward belief sentence by means of which we can directly attribute the relevant Z-state to Fred as a belief. So how can it be a belief? Yet it would be one in different circumstances — if, say, Fred's visual experience were caused by a frog or a leaf on the lawn. In such a case his demonstrative idea would have an object, and some belief sentence like (1)-(3) would be true. His Z-state would therefore be a demonstrative belief, and, what is more, a Russellian Thought. For its status as a belief would clearly depend on the existence of the object of the demonstrative idea involved.

In view of my decision to accept in this paper that there are irreducible demonstrative beliefs, I shall not dispute this argument here. There is nonetheless a possibility which goes against it, viz., that having a demonstrative belief about an object is nothing more than having a perceptual existential belief which is caused in an appropriate way by a state of affairs in which that object is essentially involved. Such an account, which I find attractive, is strongly suggested by the treatment of object perception in my 'Perceptual Representation', Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society 87 (1986/87): 91-106. See especially Sections III and IV.
The second main argument for Russellian Thoughts aims to establish that the content of a demonstrative belief depends crucially on there being an object it is about, in the sense that if there were no object the relevant Z-state would have no content. In that case it would not be a belief. So when it is a belief, it is a Russellian Thought.

The detailed argument relies on the assumption that a mental state cannot have the content necessary to qualify as a belief without having truth conditions. A belief, after all, represents a state of affairs as obtaining, and given the state of affairs it represents, its truth conditions are fixed (and vice versa). But now consider a Z-state involving a demonstrative idea, e.g., that with which I have saddled Fred. Does this Z-state represent a state of affairs, and does it have truth conditions? In the situation in which Fred’s demonstrative idea applies to an object in the world, it is clear enough that the state of affairs represented is the one in which that very object is a frog. Thus Fred’s Z-state is true iff that very object is a frog, and false iff it is not a frog. Thus his Z-state has the content necessary to qualify as a belief. But what if Fred’s demonstrative idea has no object, as in our first situation? Does Fred’s Z-state still represent a state of affairs? If so, which one? It would have to be a singular (rather than, e.g., an existential or general) state of affairs to be appropriate, but a singular state of affairs is suitable only if it involves an object to which Fred’s demonstrative idea applies, and there is no such object. We must therefore conclude that there is no state of affairs which Fred’s Z-state represents, that it has no truth conditions, and that it therefore lacks the sort of content required of beliefs.

Of course a Z-state involving a demonstrative idea with no object is not totally devoid of content. The point is, rather, that a demonstrative idea without an object has no content whatever, and that therefore a Z-state involving such an idea does not as a whole have the content of a belief. And it is indeed plausible that a demonstrative idea without an object lacks content. By hypothesis, a demonstrative idea has no descriptive content, which suggests that its content must be nothing other than the very object it represents. Moreover, consider this: in deciding whether two demonstrative ideas are the same in content, we look not to their intrinsic properties but to their objects. If Fred and Bill both have demonstrative beliefs expressible by the sentence ‘That is a frog’, we count their beliefs as the same if their demonstrative ideas apply to the same object, and we do so even if their Z-states differ intrinsically. Furthermore, we count their beliefs as different if their demonstrative ideas apply to different objects, even if their Z-states are intrinsically indistinguishable. It seems, then, that the content of a demonstrative idea is (or is determined by) the object
it represents, and that a demonstrative idea without an object therefore has no content and so cannot figure in a genuine belief.

It is worth remarking here that the above two arguments for Russellian Thoughts are connected by the following important principle concerning belief attribution and belief content:

(B) In general, ‘x believes that P’ is true only if x has a belief which is true iff P.

This is meant to hold even if ‘P’ contains ‘de re’ terms such as indexicals. Thus, e.g., (B) implies the following:

‘Pete believes that I am short’ is true only if Pete has a belief which is true iff I am short.

As far as it goes, this is surely correct. In general terms, (B) says that any oratio obliqua belief sentence is true only if the agent referred to is in a state with suitably specifiable truth-conditional content. Thus if an agent is in a state without suitably specifiable truth-conditional content (as the second argument claims Fred to be when his demonstrative idea has no object), then there is no true oratio obliqua belief sentence corresponding to it (which is what the first argument claims of Fred’s Z-state when the object is missing).

II

In this section I present my basic case against Russellian Thoughts without reference to the details of the above arguments for them. I do, however, assume that if there are any Russellian Thoughts about external objects, then demonstrative beliefs are Russellian. I therefore concentrate on trying to establish the opposing claim that a Z-state involving a demonstrative idea is a belief even if that idea has no object.

Firstly, I want to stress just how radical the Russellian’s position is. For what he commits himself to is not merely the now obvious truth that whether a belief is of or about an object, and, if so, what object it is about, is not an intrinsic property of the Z-state involved, but depends in part on something outside the agent,

or even to the more radical and surprising truth that

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1 The converse of (B) does not hold because agents do not generally believe all propositions which have the same truth conditions as those which they do believe. Thus (B) tells only half the story about the truth conditions of oratio obliqua beliefs attributions. I am disposed to think that the other half of the story must depend largely on the role of belief in psychological explanation.

RUSSELLIAN THOUGHTS 673
The content of a belief is not an intrinsic property of the Z-state involved, but depends in part on something outside the agent.\(^6\)

Nor is the Russellian claiming that a belief state lacks content or is somehow defective in its content if it involves a demonstrative idea without an object. He is saying, rather, that whatever else it is, a Z-state satisfying this condition is not a belief state. Even though it is intrinsically indistinguishable from a belief state in the very same agent and stands in the same sorts of relations as belief states to that agent’s mental life and overt behavior, to the Russellian it is still not itself a belief state. This is very implausible indeed.

Although these considerations should make us suspicious of Russellian Thoughts, they do not yet amount to a strong argument against them. They do, however, suggest an argument which I find persuasive. In outline, and very roughly, the argument goes like this: There is good reason to hold that

(a) A belief is nothing but a certain type of functional state of an agent,

and hence

(b) Any state which plays or is apt to play the main causal and explanatory roles characteristic of beliefs is itself a belief.

Since

(c) A Z-state involving a demonstrative idea without an object plays or is apt to play the main causal and explanatory roles characteristic of beliefs,

it follows that

(d) A Z-state involving a demonstrative idea without an object is a belief.

Now (b) is a fairly straightforward consequence of (a) as it is meant to be understood, and (d) is clearly implied by (b) and (c). We may therefore concentrate here on the arguments for (a) and (c).

In connection with (a), I would like to stress quite firmly that I do not mean to be endorsing any form of functionalism with respect to belief, but only a broad functionalism in terms of which the question of whether a state is a belief depends not only on its (normal) relations to inputs, outputs, and narrow mental states, but also on its characteristic causes and

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effects in the world outside the agent. Furthermore, the functionalism I am advocating here applies only to belief and not to mental states in general. Thus the fact that, e.g., qualitative experiences are arguably not functional states does not reflect adversely on anything in this paper.

A full defense of (a) would take a very long essay on its own. I have space just to mention a couple of considerations which favor a functionalist view of belief. Firstly, the way in which we regularly talk about beliefs in ordinary discourse supports the idea that our concept of a belief is a functional concept: We know very little indeed about the intrinsic properties of beliefs in humans and other familiar animals, and may even differ radically in our speculations as to what those properties are without this affecting our ability to talk intelligently and amicably about beliefs. Moreover, we happily attribute beliefs to agents solely on the basis of their past and present circumstances (which are no doubt partially responsible for their beliefs) and their linguistic and non-linguistic behavior and behavioral dispositions (which their beliefs presumably help to explain). These points suggest that what is distinctive of a belief is not its intrinsic character but simply the sort of causal and explanatory role we attribute to it. Of course this role is a rather complex one which is very difficult to characterize in full detail. For beliefs may be appealed to to explain not only behavior and behavioral dispositions, but also desires and other beliefs which we have reason to attribute to the agent concerned. Likewise, beliefs are caused not only by the external circumstances of the agent, but also by his sense experiences, desires, and other beliefs. However, none of this changes the fact that our application of the concept of belief depends not on the intrinsic properties which belief states happen to have, but on their causal and explanatory connections to other things.

This could, it appears, be due to our epistemic limitations. For perhaps, it may be suggested, we rely on extrinsic, causal-explanatory properties in ascribing beliefs only because at present we have no access to the intrinsic properties which determine whether or not a state really is a belief. We must, however, reject this view since it requires that our concept of belief be analytically tied to some particular conception of the intrinsic nature of belief states. This is obviously not the case. It is incompatible with the fact that the intrinsic nature of belief states is (or could be) an open, empirical question. It goes against our willingness to countenance the possibility of

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7 For further details on the sort of belief functionalism I have in mind, see my 'Stalnaker on Inquiry', *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 16 (1987): 219-72, especially Sections 1.1, 1.4, 1.5, and 2.1. (The material on belief content and the individuation of beliefs in these sections is also indirectly relevant to the considerations alluded to in footnote 5.)
beings which have beliefs despite being very different from us in their intrinsic make-up. And, finally, it wrongly implies that we would in general be willing to ignore extrinsic, causal-explanatory properties when ascribing beliefs if we had ready access to the intrinsic properties of belief states, whatever they may be.

The second point I want to make in support of (a) is this: A (broad) functionalist account of belief is the only one I know of which does not make a total mystery of the issue of how beliefs can have representational content. Not that anyone is yet in a position to give a fully adequate functionalist account of belief content. After all, we do not even have a detailed functionalist theory of what a belief is. But this much is clear: There are functional states simpler than beliefs which have representational content that can be accommodated in naturalistic and functionalist terms. A state of the control mechanism in a homing rocket, e.g., might be said to represent the target’s being 10° to the north of the rocket’s line of flight (i) the state is of a kind which would normally be caused by the target’s being 10° to the north of the line of flight, and (ii) it is of a kind which would normally cause or tend to cause the rocket’s line of flight to shift 10° north (or 10° + n° north) over a certain distance. Of course nothing as simple as this would do for belief, not least because of the complex connections between beliefs and other beliefs, and beliefs and other mental states and events. But this does not change the point that the functionalist approach to belief at least holds out the prospect of a naturalistic account of belief content.

That is all I have to say here in support of (a). In support of (c) I would like to argue that Fred’s Z-state (which we may take as a typical demonstrative Z-state) plays or is apt to play the main causal and explanatory roles of belief states even when there is no object corresponding to his demonstrative idea. Walking across the lawn on the evening in questions he hesitates, says ‘That’s a frog — let me get a spade and move it to the pond’, and moves off in the direction of his garden shed to do so. And just before he hesitates, he comes to believe that there is a frog before him on the lawn, and to hope that his small son, who is terrified of frogs, is inside the house. Supposing these events take place, what explains them? Fred’s Z-state of course. It explains them just as a belief does. And the fact that his demonstrative idea has no object makes no difference to the explanation. With or without it, his Z-state functions as a belief. Of course in the case we are imagining his Z-state is not caused by a frog or something like a frog on the lawn, and in that respect it is perhaps not like most other

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demonstrative beliefs. But we must and do allow that beliefs can have strange causes. This includes demonstrative beliefs, which generally tend to represent states of affairs which cause them. This cannot, however, be true of all demonstrative beliefs, otherwise they would all be true. Fred's Z-state is a demonstrative belief because it is of a type which would normally be caused by a state of affairs it represents, and because its effects and potential effects on his mental life and behavior are those typical of demonstrative beliefs. No adequate belief functionalism could require more than this.

There are at least two possible responses to this argument for (c). One is to deny that we need to appeal to Fred's demonstrative Z-state to explain his behavior and the changes in his behavioral dispositions, beliefs, and desires. After all, it might be claimed, we can explain all his behavior by appealing to his non-demonstrative belief that there is a frog on the lawn before him, and we can explain this belief in turn by appealing, not to his demonstrative Z-state, but to his visual experience. Whatever the merits of this move, it does not help the Russellian. For if Fred's Z-state has no explanatory role to play when his demonstrative idea has no object, it equally has no explanatory role to play when it has an object. And if we push this line of reasoning far enough, we will doubtless get rid of demonstrative beliefs, and with them Russellian Thoughts.

The second response to my argument that I wish to consider goes like this:

What your reasoning tends to show is that the content of a Z-state is irrelevant to its explanatory powers but essential to its being a belief. Thus you cannot establish that Fred's Z-state is a belief by showing that it plays a certain explanatory role.9

Very briefly, the main reason I think we should reject this view is that it fails to do justice to the fact that beliefs are used not to explain mere bodily movements, but actions, which are themselves loaded with intentional content which is connected with the content of the beliefs which go towards explaining them. Equally significant, perhaps, is the role of beliefs in explaining successes and failures. Suzy made a fortune because she believed (truly) that ABC was about to declare a huge profit. Pete almost killed himself because he believed (falsely) that his brakes were in order. In cases like this Z-states bereft of content are no substitutes for full-blooded beliefs. But even if they were, the anti-content response is of

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9 This response is suggested by the views advanced by Stephen Stich in From Folk Psychology to Cognitive Science: The Case Against Belief (Cambridge: M. I. T. Press, 1983).
no comfort to the Russellian, for what it ultimately leads to is the rejection of the concept of belief as a useless relic of an unscientific age. To go along with this is to remove all interest from the question of whether demonstrative beliefs are Russellian or not.

Of course none of this will persuade those who reject belief functionalism. For them I observe that my case against Russellian Thoughts would not suffer if (a) were replaced by the far weaker non-functionalist claim

\[(a^*) \quad \text{A state of an agent is a belief if it is functionally and intrinsically indistinguishable from a belief in that agent,}\]

for it is clear that a demonstrative Z-state (such as Fred's) satisfies both these conditions. And although (a*) may, as I hold, be unnecessarily weak, it is surely very difficult to dispute given the considerations I have raised in support of (a).

III

We have, then, a strong basic case against the view that demonstrative beliefs are Russellian Thoughts. To complete it we need to see what is wrong with the arguments presented on behalf of the Russellian in Section I.

The direct conclusion of the first argument, to repeat, was that, if there is no object corresponding to a demonstrative idea involved in a Z-state, then that Z-state cannot be truly attributed to the agent concerned by means of a belief sentence of the form 'x believes that P' or 'x believes of y that P'. This is correct, but it does not follow that such a Z-state is not a belief. We should expect ordinary language to provide us with a simple and efficient means of attributing typical, everyday beliefs to people in typical, everyday situations. But a situation in which a demonstrative idea involved in a belief has no object is not at all typical, and it is therefore not surprising that more complex linguistic means are required to attribute such a belief to an agent. But it can be done. Here are three ways for Fred's case:

\[\begin{align*}
(5) & \quad \text{Fred believes, as he might put it, 'That is a frog', even though his 'that' would then refer to nothing.} \\
(6) & \quad \text{Fred has a belief involving an empty demonstrative idea to the effect that the corresponding object is a frog.} \\
(7) & \quad \text{Fred believes that something which he takes to be before him is a frog.}
\end{align*}\]

These are all more or less inelegant, and without further commentary may be misleading in some contexts. But this does not mean that (5)-(7) are
false because they attempt to attribute to Fred a belief which he does not have. All of them can be understood as true of the situation which they are meant to describe. This includes (7), in which the noun phrase 'something which he takes to be before him' functions not as an existential quantifier within the scope of 'believes', but as a proxy for an unspecified singular term which expresses perceptual reference and which happens to be empty. (It is indeed because of the way in which this noun phrase functions here that I am not treating (7) as an instance of the form 'x believes that P'.)

The central thesis of the second (and far more impressive) argument for Russellian Thoughts is the claim that a Z-state involving a demonstrative idea without an object, such as Fred's, does not have truth-conditional content. Although the case given for this claim is not in itself implausible, it would be completely undermined by a statement of the truth (and falsity) conditions of Fred's Z-state — i.e., his belief. And such a statement can quite easily be given, as follows:

(T) Fred's belief is true iff there is an object corresponding to his demonstrative idea which is a frog, and false iff there is an object corresponding to his demonstrative idea which is not a frog.

But is this acceptable? One objection — that (T) involves giving up bivalence — can be dismissed immediately on the ground that anyone who is committed to bivalence can easily save it by substituting 'and false otherwise' for the second clause in (T).

A second objection to the approach represented by (T) might be that it is committed to the view that, e.g., all demonstrative beliefs which can be perspicuously expressed by an utterance of the sentence 'That is a frog' have the same content even though they may be about different objects, and in some cases about no objects. This is not, however, a consequence of the approach. The approach does indeed suggest, and quite appropriately, that these beliefs are very similar in content, but at the same time it implies that no pair of them have exactly the same content. For in specifying the content of each distinct belief it is necessary to make reference to a distinct demonstrative idea, and this has the effect that for any two of the beliefs concerned there are circumstances in which they would differ in truth value. This itself may of course be found objectionable, for, as I have already noted, if Fred and Bill both have demonstrative beliefs expressible by the sentence 'That is a frog', we are disposed to say that they have the same belief if their demonstrative ideas apply to the same object. My reply is that the truth of a same-belief attribution, such as 'Fred and Bill believe
the same thing', does not require that the belief states concerned have exactly the same content. I have presented evidence for this elsewhere and cannot go into the details here."

Perhaps the most significant objection to (T) goes like this: The clause in (T) which purports to give the truth-conditional content of Fred's belief is existential, and, moreover, it makes mention of Fred's demonstrative idea. But Fred's belief, if it is that, is not existential, and it is not about his demonstrative idea. Thus the relevant clause in (T) does not represent the same state of affairs as Fred's Z-state. So it appears that (T) cannot after all be used to specify the content of Fred's Z-state. Underlying this objection is a crucially important assumption which is taken for granted in the second argument for Russellian Thoughts. This assumption, which is very widespread in contemporary philosophy of language and philosophy of mind even though it does not often surface explicitly, can be expressed as follows:

(C) The only fully satisfactory way of specifying the content of an utterance or thought is by means of a sentence which (in the relevant context) has the same content as it.

This is a natural view for anyone who is fully committed to either the Tarski-Davidson or the possible worlds approach to philosophical semantics. For in both cases the final specification of the content of a sentence in the object language is given by a sentence in the metalanguage which has the same content as it. And the same holds in some alternative approaches to philosophical semantics. It is therefore not at all surprising that (C) enjoys widespread tacit consent.

However, the successes of approaches to semantics which conform to (C) lie largely in the region of bivalent languages or language fragments which are free of indexicals and empty singular terms. I think we are forced to reject (C) when we come to deal with language and thought involving indexical and empty terms and ideas. Consider the case of the first person. We know from the work of Castañeda and others that a first person claim such as

(8) I am the editor of _Soul_


**A similar point is made in different terms on p. 110 of Ernest Sosa's 'Propositions and Indexical Attitudes', in Herman Parfit (ed.), _On Believing: Epistemological and Semiotic Approaches_ (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1983).
(or the corresponding belief) differs in content from any claim (or belief) not in the first person.11 From this it follows that we cannot give the content of an instance of (8) uttered by someone other than ourselves, e.g., Suzy, by means of a sentence which in our mouths has the same content as her utterance of (8). We might try to do so by uttering something like this:

(U) Suzy’s utterance of (8) means that (or: is true iff) Suzy/she is the editor of Soul.

However, our utterance of ‘Suzy/she is the editor of Soul’ does not, by Castañeda’s arguments, have exactly the same content as Suzy’s utterance of (8), and (U) therefore fails to specify the full content of Suzy’s utterance. What it leaves out, of course, is that her utterance expresses a first person thought about Suzy. However we might modify or supplement (U) to accommodate this, the result, if it does full justice to Suzy’s utterance, will go against (C). And since Suzy’s utterance surely does have comprehensible and satisfactorily specifiable content, it follows that (C) must be rejected. Thus the main barrier to our giving the content of Fred’s demonstrative belief by means of clauses which do not exactly share that content is down.

There is, however, one further challenge I should respond to, viz., the demand that I specify the content of Fred’s demonstrative idea when there is no object corresponding to it. This is important for the Russellian just because it is part of his case that if Fred’s idea has no content then his Z-state as a whole lacks the kind of content required of beliefs. Fortunately there is in principle a way of satisfying the Russellian’s demand, for we can give the content of Fred’s demonstrative idea by specifying a rule which would determine what the object of his idea would be if it had one. Such a rule could be expressed by a sentence of the form

(V) The object of Fred’s idea is the F,

where ‘the F’ is a complex description which no doubt makes reference to the actual and possible causal origins of Fred’s demonstrative idea and the Z-state in which it features. Of course this description would not have the same content as Fred’s idea, which we have agreed is non-descriptive. But this objection to (V) can easily be answered. As we have already seen, it is not necessary and may not be possible to specify the content of a belief or sentential utterance by means of a sentence with the same content. By analogous reasoning, it is not necessary and may not be possible to specify

the content of an idea or an utterance of a term by means of a term with
the same content. This point, apart from being of interest in its own right,
also undermines the case for Russellian Thoughts.**

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