Critical Notice of Scott Soames’s Case against Two-Dimensionalism

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This rich and stimulating book\(^1\) gives both a clear and cogent big picture of what is at stake in an important current philosophical debate, and some spirited and incisive arguments about the details. It is a defense of what its author regards as a major shift in our thinking about the sources of the intentionality of our speech and thought, and an attack on what he regards as a counterrevolution that is attempting to resurrect the view that was dominant prior to the shift in a new and more sophisticated form. The shift was “the Kripkean revolution,” led by Saul Kripke in *Naming and Necessity*, assisted by David Kaplan, Hilary Putnam, and Keith Donnellan. The counterrevolution exploits a piece of technical apparatus, two-dimensional modal semantics, which has its original application in the work of the revolutionaries themselves. The “ambitious two-dimensionalists,” who are the primary target of Soames’s critique, generalized the kind of two-dimensional semantics for indexical and demonstrative expressions developed by David Kaplan and used it to try “to reinstate descriptivism in the philosophy of language, internalism in the philosophy of mind, and some version of conceptualism in our understanding of modality in the face of the challenges that rocked these positions more than thirty years ago” (329). But, Soames argues, this attempt avoids “the deepest and most important philosophical consequences” (54) of Kripke’s work.

The book begins with a quick summary of the traditional conception of reference and intentionality ("the descriptivist picture") against which the heroes of our story were reacting, and of the main ideas of their alternative conception. It then describes the seeds of the ambitious two-dimensionalist doctrine in the work of Kaplan and of Kripke himself (who is found occasionally to backslide), and some early uses of the two-dimensional apparatus by this reviewer, and by Martin Davies and Lloyd Humberstone that precede the development of the ambitious doctrine. The bulk of the book is an exposition and critique of ambitious two-dimensionalism, as developed by Frank Jackson and David Chalmers, mainly in Jackson’s *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998) and Chalmers’s *The Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). The book concludes with a brief chapter on the way a constructive theory that extends the nondescriptivist ideas might respond to the problems that remain, but there is little here that goes beyond what was done in Soames’s earlier book, *Beyond Rigidity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

I agree with Soames’s characterization of both the revolution and the counterrevolution, and with his resistance to the attempt to turn back the clock. I also think that his critique identifies some of the crucial points on which the issues turn. But unlike Soames, I think that the apparatus of two-dimensional modal semantics, properly used, helps to clarify some of the phenomena that the Kripkean revolution brought to light. I agree that it cannot explain away those phenomena, but I think it can contribute to explaining them. Soames thinks that this framework only distorts the phenomena and that it points the way to the misguided counterrevolution, and so, since I have used the framework in models of speech and thought, I am one of the targets of his attack. I will try, in this critical notice, to separate the two-dimensional framework from the ideology that it has been used to promote.

I will begin with a very general and impressionistic account of what I take the moral of Kripke’s story to be, connecting this characterization with some of Soames’s criticisms of Jackson and Chalmers. Second, I will sketch the two-dimensional apparatus and distinguish some different applications of it. I will argue that there is an ideologically neutral descriptive use of this formal framework that involves no problematic commitment and that has no counterrevolutionary implications, a use that I think is motivated by the picture of reference and possibility that Kripke painted. Third, I will consider some of Soames’s reasons for reject-
ing even this use of the two-dimensional framework and respond to some of his criticisms of claims that I have made in terms of the apparatus, interpreted in this way. I will conclude by trying to dissociate myself from what Soames claims is a fundamental assumption of the use to which I have put the framework.

It was not Kripke’s style to make grand claims about the big picture, but let me try to describe one general lesson to which I think his arguments and constructions point. His discussions of reference suggest a rejection of what might be called intentional foundationalism, the idea that there is a point of direct contact at which our intentional acts and states, either linguistic or mental, meet their subject matter, a point of acquaintance that leaves no place for any epistemological gap between our speech or thought and what it is about. Kripke directed our attention to the undeniable fact that it is an empirical, contingent fact that our words mean what they do and that our thoughts have the content that they have, and his examples brought out that the facts that determine the content of what a person means or thinks are not always accessible to the person. It is a mistake (Kripke’s arguments suggest) to try to fill the potential gap between what is internal and accessible and what determines reference or content with some intermediate intentional object, something to which we do have direct access, or with which we are acquainted in some particularly intimate way—something that is purely internal but that can be what our speech acts say, and the way our thoughts represent the world to be. The descriptivist tries to fill the gap between a name and its referent with a sense that has a descriptive content. The externalist critics (Kripke and his allies) argue that this move distorts the content and our epistemic relation to it, but they also argue that this move won’t provide an internalist solution to the problem of intentionality anyway, since the properties and relations that constitute the content of descriptive expressions are no more “in the head” or in some way directly connected to linguistic and mental acts and objects than are the particular persons and concrete objects to which we refer.

Central to the moral of the Kripkean story, as I understand it, is what Soames describes as “a crucial distinction between semantic and presemantic senses of ‘reference fixing’” (55). He argues that Frank Jackson confuses the two senses of reference fixing in this quotation: “Although any view about how ‘water’ gets to pick out what it does will be controversial, it is incredible that there is no story to tell—it is not magic
that ‘water’ picks out what it does pick out—so we can be confident that there is a reference-fixing story to tell.” The two notions of the reference-fixing facts that Jackson conflates, Soames argues, are “(i) the facts that originally brought it about that water stands for what it does, and that have sustained the reference of the word since it was initially established, and (ii) the facts about the meaning of water that speakers must master in order to understand the word” (182–83).

I think Soames is right to emphasize this distinction and right to charge Jackson with blurring it by assuming that the whole story about reference fixing should be incorporated into the semantics. But this was not just an oversight on Jackson’s part. The pressure to try to put all of reference fixing into the semantics is driven by the foundationalist picture, which implicitly assumes that the presemantic connections must be unmediated.

Possible worlds enter Kripke’s story as a device for giving a clear and precise characterization of the semantic hypothesis about names that he was defending. One says what the truth conditions are for a particular kind of statement (for example, statements with proper names as constituents) by saying what the world would have to be like for the statement to be true. But (according to the Kripkean story, as I read it) the theorist’s characterizations of possible worlds do not pretend to provide the elusive intentional foundation, a direct and unmediated characterization of content. We describe a possible world by referring to things, kinds, events, properties, and relations that we find in the actual world and then stipulating that the possible situation we intend to describe shall contain them. There is no better way to do it. To the extent that we are ignorant or mistaken about the people, things, kinds, or properties that we use to describe a possibility, we will be ignorant or mistaken about what the possibility that we have stipulated is like. So, for example, if it is gold that we have put into the possible world that we choose to talk about, then the world we have specified will be one containing an element with atomic number 79, whether we know it or not. This fact about the way we specify possibilities is, I think, the source of a posteriori necessity, and the fact that the only way to specify a possible world is by using materials that the actual world provides is the reason why the phenomenon of necessary a posteriori truth cannot be explained away, or factored into

2. The quotation is from Frank Jackson, From Metaphysics to Ethics (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 82, quoted on p. 182 of Soames, Reference and Description.
a part that is necessary, but purely conceptual, and a part that is empirical, but contingent.

I assume that Soames will find this sketch of the Kripkean big picture congenial. It agrees with his account of it, first about the importance of the distinction between the semantic and presemantic senses of reference fixing, and second about the ineliminable character of a posteriori necessity. But I also think that this Kripkean picture points the way to a useful application of the two-dimensional framework, an application that helps to clarify the relation between semantic and presemantic determinants of reference and to clarify the way that we deal with the inevitable potential for empirical ignorance and error about the character of the space of possibility in which we locate our world. To make this point, I will describe the abstract framework and distinguish several different ways in which it has been applied to the phenomena of speech and thought. I will then argue that if it is applied in the way that I have applied it, it does not have counterrevolutionary consequences and that the criticisms that Soames makes of this application can be answered.

The two-dimensional framework itself involves no metaphysical commitments, or commitments about the nature of speech and thought, that go beyond the commitments of ordinary one-dimensional possible worlds semantics. That is not to say that those commitments are uncontroversial, but one who embraces the Kripkean revolution should not find them objectionable. Possible worlds semantics assumes a space of possible worlds and uses them to represent the truth conditions of statements and thoughts. There are different ways of understanding what possible worlds are; Soames follows the actualists (who include Kripke) in taking possible worlds (or more accurately labeled, possible world-states) as a kind of property that a world might have. When possible worlds are understood in this way, the framework can be seen as simply a perspicuous way of representing the truth conditions of a statement: those conditions (those possible states of the world) that, if they obtained, would make the statement true. One may define a notion of informational content—a bare representation of truth conditions—as a function from possible worlds to truth values. The languages of modal logic are interpreted in terms of such a framework, with informational contents, or sentence intensions, as the semantic values of the sentences, and modal operators, interpreted by compositional semantic rules that specify how the semantic values, in this sense, are functions of the semantic values of their parts.

Two-dimensional modal semantics, in its basic form, uses exactly the same primitive resources—a space of possible states of the world—
but it defines a more complex notion of semantic value in terms of those resources. A *two-dimensional sentence intension* is a function taking a *pair* of possible worlds into a truth value, or equivalently, a function taking a possible world into an ordinary sentence intension. A two-dimensional modal logic then might contain a wider range of operators, interpreted with compositional rules that specify how the semantic values, in this more fine-grained sense, are a function of the values of their parts.³

The two-dimensional intensions can be used to define, in two different ways, corresponding one-dimensional intensions. If \( f(x, y) \) is a two-dimensional intension, then first, for a given \( x \), one can define an ordinary intension (an informational content), \( f_x(y) \); second, one can define the informational content that results from taking the two arguments of the two-dimensional intension to be the same: \( f_A(x) = f(x, x) \).⁴

The ambitions of ambitious two-dimensionalism derive, not from this framework itself, but only from some presuppositions of a particular application of it. In applications, it will be assumed that two-dimensional intensions may be associated with expressions and/or mental events and states, and the controversies have their source in the kind of story that is told or presupposed about what determines those associations.

Let me distinguish three uses to which the two-dimensional apparatus has been put. First, there is what Soames calls “benign two-dimensionalism,” which is David Kaplan’s semantics for indexical pronouns and demonstratives. The theory is benign, since it is simply a descriptive semantic theory that makes no claims about the facts that explain what gives a linguistic practice its semantics. It is two-dimensional since it distinguishes what Kaplan called the *character* of an expression from its *content*. There are two steps from meaning (character) to extension, two

³. This is the simplest version of the abstract theory, which takes the two arguments of the functions that are two-dimensional intensions to be arguments of the same kind: possible worlds. In some variations, the first argument may be a more fine-grained object such as a *context* (which includes a possible world as a component) or a *centered possible world* (a possible world plus a designated center).

⁴. Just to connect this apparatus with some of the jargon that has been used: The first of these derivative intensions is what Frank Jackson calls the C-intension and David Chalmers originally called the secondary intension. The second is what Jackson calls the A-intension, what Chalmers called the primary intension. In my use of this apparatus, I called a two-dimensional intension a *propositional concept*, and the second of the two derivative one-dimensional intensions, the *diagonal* proposition determined by the propositional concept. In David Kaplan’s use of this kind of apparatus, the two-dimensional intension is the *character*, and the first of the two derivative one-dimensional intensions is the *content*. 
parameters needed to determine the extension that is associated with a use of an expression with a certain character: character plus context determines content, and content plus a possible world (or “circumstance of evaluation”) determines an extension (in the case of a sentence, a truth value).

The ambitious two-dimensional theories generalize Kaplan’s theory, arguing that a much wider range of expressions are at least covertly indexical. They argue that an adequate semantics for proper names, natural kind terms, in fact all of the expressions that externalists such as Kripke, Hilary Putnam, and Tyler Burge appeal to in their arguments for the external individuation of content, must assign to those expressions both a character and a content, where the character must be internal to the speaker and determinable a priori. The ambitious and philosophically controversial aspect of this generalization was the assumption that there had to be a level of meaning for all expressions to which speakers had a priori access, an assumption that played no role in motivating Kaplan’s semantics. For Kaplan, at least in his early theory, character was just a means speakers used to determine content; it was the content that was the information conveyed in a statement and the content of the belief that was expressed. But in Jackson’s and Chalmers’s generalized theories, it is the A-intension or primary intension, determined by a two-dimensional intension (the generalization of character), that represents the information conveyed and expressed.

The third use of the two-dimensional framework, the application of it that I suggested in the 1970s, is different from both the benign Kaplan theory and the later theories of Jackson and Chalmers. This application was motivated by the Kripkean picture, but it is independent of it. This interpretation is unambitious and, I hope, also benign, but unlike both Kaplan’s use of the abstract apparatus, and the ambitious extensions of it, it does not hold that a two-dimensional intension is given by a proper semantics for a language. Rather, it uses the two dimensions to represent the two ways, presemantic or metasemantic, and semantic, that the extension of an expression may depend on empirical facts. We begin

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with a fact that is uncontroversial, but that is made particularly salient by Kripke’s discussions of reference fixing: that it is a contingent, empirical fact that the linguistic expressions we use have the semantic properties that they have. To put the point in terms of the possible worlds jargon: a given linguistic expression will have different meanings and contents in different possible worlds. More specifically, one can say that a particular token utterance (identified by its acoustical properties) will have a different assertive content in different possible worlds. In some alternative possible situations, the words used will have the same meaning, but will say something different because the relevant contextual facts are different. In other cases, the utterance will have a different content because the words used have different meanings, or because different compositional semantic rules explain how the words are put together. In a case of doubt, dispute, or error about what a particular token utterance is saying, such alternative possibilities may be relevant to understanding what is going on in the situation. To take a trivial example, suppose Adam thinks that an optician is a medical doctor who specializes in diseases of the eyes. (That is, he thinks that “optician” means what “oculist” or “ophthalmologist” in fact mean.) As a result of this, Adam will misunderstand my statement when I say that I have an appointment with an optician this afternoon. Now both the statement I in fact made and the statement that Adam mistook me to be making will distinguish between a range of alternative possibilities, so the truth of what I say (where “what I say” is understood as a nonrigid description that denotes different propositions in different possible worlds) will depend on the facts in two different ways, and one might represent both of the ways with a two-dimensional matrix (a propositional concept), defined for a relevant set of possible situations in which the utterance event takes place. Such representations may be useful for describing the dynamics of a conversation in which there is miscommunication, perhaps followed by a repair. (I may say, when Adam’s misunderstanding became apparent, “an optician is not a doctor—it’s a person who fits eyeglasses,” using the word to convey information about what it means.)

One theoretical use of the apparatus, interpreted in this way, would be to represent the structure of the kind of thought experiment that Tyler Burge used to defend the doctrine he called “anti-individualism.” (The conclusions Burge drew from his thought experiment were controversial, and one might dispute his intuitive judgments about the case, but the descriptive apparatus for representing the structure of the argu-
ment should not be contentious). An anti-individualist thought experiment is a case of a counterfactual situation, similar in certain respects to the actual situation, in which an expression (such as “arthritis”) has a different meaning from the meaning it actually has. The expression, as used in the actual world, has an extension (in the counterfactual situation) that is different from the extension that the expression, as used in the counterfactual situation, has in the counterfactual situation. A two-dimensional matrix gives a concise representation of the relevant semantic and metasemantic facts. What is essential to the case is that the two-dimensional intension have different values on the vertical dimension for two possible worlds that are similar with respect to the internal properties of the subject.

I mention the use of the apparatus to represent a Burgean thought experiment in order to emphasize the difference between this innocent use of the two-dimensional framework and the more ambitious use. Burge emphatically rejected the idea that his thought experiments showed that the relevant expressions were indexical, and the use of the two-dimensional apparatus to describe the situation makes no commitment that is incompatible with this rejection. I have, from the beginning of my use of the two-dimensional apparatus, tried to emphasize the contrast between this use of the apparatus and Kaplan’s; it is not an extension of the Kaplanian semantics, but a different (though complementary) use of a formally similar bit of machinery.

Now I won’t pretend that the claims that I have made in terms of this apparatus about assertion and the ascription of propositional attitudes—claims that Soames criticizes in his book—are innocent or neutral, but I do want to emphasize that those claims presuppose this metasemantic interpretation of the framework. Soames acknowledges that my two-dimensional matrices are not to be identified with Kaplanian characters, though he seems to think that this is a cause for worry. He says (about a two-dimensional intension, or propositional concept for an utterance in a classic Frege-puzzle case) “Presumably this propositional concept is some function from contexts to propositions which differs in certain ways from the actual character of S, but not others. Clearly, this aspect of the view needs further elaboration” (93). But once the possible world-states in terms of which the matrix is defined are given, the propositional concept is determined, without further elaboration. The semantics that is relevant to determining the proposition that is the value of the function for a given possible world is the semantics that applies to the sentence
in that possible world. The actual character of the sentence is irrelevant, except relative to possible worlds (such as the actual world) in which the sentence has that character.

Soames notes that I said that in the relevant possible worlds, the sentence in question should be interpreted “in the standard way.” What was assumed to be standard was the general Kripkean semantics and metasemantics: that names are rigid designators, and that their references are fixed by causal-historical chains of the kind that Kripke discusses. What was not assumed to be the same as in the actual world were the particular causal and historical facts that are relevant, according to this general account, to determining reference. These assumptions about the possible worlds relative to which the propositional concept was defined were appropriate because the relevant possible worlds are those that are compatible with the presumed shared knowledge of speaker and addressee, or with what the speaker is presupposing. So, for example, in an intuitively natural case in which someone does not know that Hesperus is Phosphorus, we can assume that the person is linguistically competent and knows (tacitly) that names in general are used in the way they are in fact used. I take this to imply that, in all possible worlds compatible with that person’s knowledge (and with the knowledge he shares with the speaker who tells him that Hesperus is Phosphorus), the general semantic account will be the same as it is in the actual world, even if the astronomical facts relevant to applying this account are different.

An assertion that Hesperus is Phosphorus, and similar cases, are problematic because our theory tells us that they express necessary truths, but it also seems that they convey contingent information. My general strategy for clarifying such cases was to begin by asking what the world is like according to a person who believes that the statement is false, or what kind of possible world would be excluded by one who told someone that it was true? The idea was to try to separate this question from the question how it is that the sentence used to make the statement manages to convey that information. If we approach the Hesperus/Phosphorus case in this way, it seems reasonable to think that in a plausible situation in which someone doesn’t know that Hesperus is Phosphorus, the kind of possible state of the world that is compatible with his knowledge, and the kind that he will rule out if he is told and believes that Hesperus is Phosphorus, is a world in which the astronomical facts are different in a way that makes it true that what “Hesperus” denotes is a different object from what “Phosphorus” denotes. What “Hesperus is Phosphorus” actually says, according to the standard Kripkean semantics, will still be true.
in this kind of possible world, but the diagonal proposition defined on
a metasemantic propositional concept for the utterance in question will
be false in such a world, and so will exclude it. This proposition seems at
least to give a descriptively adequate representation of the information
that the statement conveys. (The story I tell about a Gricean mechanism
by which the sentence comes to say, or at least to mean, the proposition
obtained by diagonalization is more speculative, but whatever the verdict
on this story, the descriptive claim that this proposition does represent
the information conveyed seems plausible.)

Soames’s main complaint about this story—what he regards as
the more serious of the two problems he raises about it—is that it falsely
presupposes that the subject does not know what “Hesperus” and/or
“Phosphorus” refers to, since the analysis requires that one or both of
these names must refer to different things in possible worlds compatible
with the subject’s knowledge and with the shared knowledge that defines
the context. He writes, “Certainly, each of the conversational participants
may know perfectly well that ‘Hesperus’ refers to this object [pointing in
the evening to Venus] and that ‘Phosphorus’ refers to that object [point-
ing in the morning to Venus]. They may even have done the pointing
themselves. Clearly, these speakers know of the referent of each name
that it is the referent of that name. Hence the (contingent) propositions
expressed by ‘Hesperus’ refers to x and ‘Phosphorus’ refers to x, relative to an
assignment of Venus to ‘x’, should be among those that have already been
assumed or established in the conversation” (93).

Now there are a number of different kinds of claim made here
that should be distinguished: (1) knowledge ascriptions, using demon-
stratives (the speakers know that ‘Hesperus’ refers to this object [pointing]),
(2) **de re** knowledge ascription (the speakers know of the referent
of each name that it is the referent of that name), and (3) theoretical
ascriptions of knowledge of singular propositions (the speakers know
the proposition expressed by ‘Hesperus’ refers to x, relative to the assign-
ment of Venus to ‘x’). The identification of these three kinds of claim,
or inferences from one to another, are controversial, and in particular, it
begs the question against the account that Soames is criticizing to infer
(3) from (1). For the diagonalization strategy applies straightforwardly,
without further assumptions, to the demonstrative knowledge claims;
assertions involving demonstratives and personal pronouns, as well as
those involving proper names, were among the paradigms to which the
strategy was first applied. We can construct metasemantic propositional
concepts for the sentences, “‘Hesperus’ refers to this object [pointing,
in the evening]” and “‘Phosphorus’ refers to this object [pointing in the morning]”; they will be determined by the same assumptions we made for the original case. The “horizontal” propositions (the propositions determined by the standard semantic rules, applied in the world in question) will be contingent, relative to the worlds compatible with the context, and they will be the singular propositions that Soames specifies, but the diagonals will both be necessary (relative to those worlds), representing the fact that the information about the referents of the names is knowledge shared by the participants in the conversation.

So does the account require that a person who doesn’t know that Hesperus is Phosphorus therefore does not know what ‘Hesperus’ (or ‘Phosphorus’) refers to? “Knowing who” and “knowing what” are notoriously context dependent. On first pass, it seems right to say that one knows what ‘Hesperus’ refers to if one knows an appropriate complete answer to the question, “What does ‘Hesperus’ refer to?” The answer, “to that object [pointing to Venus in the evening]” seems clearly an adequate and appropriate answer (at least in one context), even if it is interpreted in the way I want to interpret it. So if O’Leary can answer that question, then he knows what ‘Hesperus’ refers to (at least in that context). But in that context, he may not know what ‘Phosphorus’ refers to. (Speaking for myself, though I think I am linguistically competent with the name ‘Hesperus’, I am not a competent stargazer and could not identify Hesperus in the night sky. So if you were to ask me, as we gaze at the sky at night, whether I know what ‘Hesperus’ refers to—a context where the appropriate correct answer to the embedded question would be “it refers to that object [pointing to Venus]”—my response would have to be “no.”)

What about de re knowledge attributions? Does my account require that a person who does not know that Hesperus is Phosphorus therefore does not know of Hesperus that ‘Hesperus’ (or ‘Phosphorus’) refers to it? De re attitude ascriptions are also notoriously context dependent. I think such ascriptions are appropriate and correct when the ascriber can identify a proposition known or believed by someone as a function of an individual. That is, the ascriber refers to an individual, and uses that individual to say what proposition it is that the subject knows or believes. This is most straightforward when the proposition specified is a singular proposition about the individual, though there seem to be cases where the context allows one to characterize the content of a belief in terms of an individual even though it is not plausible to attribute belief in a
singular proposition. (A familiar kind of example: The police are look-
ing for the person who stole the jewels; they have no idea who he or she
is, though they have some hypotheses about his or her whereabouts. An
accomplice says to the thief, “The police think you have left town.”)

A variation on one of Soames’s own examples of a quantified belief
attribution seems to me to point to the need to allow for a divergence
between de re belief ascription and the ascription of belief with a singu-
lar proposition as its content: “There is a planet which is such that the
ancients believed, when they saw it in the morning, that it was visible only
in the morning, while also believing, when they saw it in the evening that
it was visible only in the evening” (341). This still seems okay if we change
the last part so that it reads “while also not believing, when they saw it
in the evening that it was visible in the morning.” Strictly, these state-
ments seem to require beliefs that come and go, but that is not what the
situation seems to suggest. Whatever the story about how the sentences
manage to convey this information, it seems clear that what is suggested
is that in the world according to these ancients, there were two distinct
heavenly bodies, only one of which was visible only in the morning, and
that each of them can be determined, with the help of two distinct con-
textual clues, as a function of an actual planet.

All of the examples Soames uses to raise problems for my account
have a similar form, and to each I will give a similar response. So consider
the paperweight:6 Suppose David is with Scott in his office, and they are
looking at a paperweight on his desk. David wonders whether it is made
of wood or plastic, and Scott tells him that it is made of wood. There were
initially two (epistemic) possibilities open—that it was made of wood,
and that it was made of plastic—and Scott’s assertion ruled one of them
out. But it is metaphorically impossible for this very wooden paperweight
to be made of plastic. So if we insist that the epistemic possibilities be
real possibilities, then we will have to say that the world as it might have
been (according to David) is a world in which the paperweight in ques-
tion was a similar but numerically distinct one. But this is wrong (Soames
argues) since it is common knowledge between David and Scott that it is
this paperweight that they are talking about.

6. This example is introduced and discussed by Soames in Reference and Descrip-
tion, 96ff.
Again, to try to understand the situation, we should begin with the question, what might the world be like, according to David, and the answer I am looking for is a description, from the theorist’s external point of view, of a situation that is the way, overall, that David thinks the world might be, a situation that will be ruled out by Scott’s statement. The uncontroversial part of the answer to this question is that it is a world in which David and Scott are in Scott’s office, looking at a paperweight of a certain size and shape that is sitting on the desk and that is made of plastic. But Soames wants to insist that we should add to this description of the possible world-state that the paperweight in question is this very one, one that is essentially made of wood, even though in the possible world in question, it is made of plastic. In contrast, I want to insist that if the world had been the way David thought that it might be, then the paperweight would have been a different one. The ground of Soames’s insistence is that it is intuitively clear that both David and Scott know that it is this paperweight that they are talking about. I grant this, but give a different analysis of what it means to say that they know that it is this paperweight that they are talking about, an analysis that follows naturally from the same assumptions as were made in the account of the original statement. Soames will also note that a de re attitude attribution would be appropriate here: We, describing the situation from outside, can correctly say that it is this paperweight that David thinks might be made of plastic. Again, I agree, since I agree that (given the context of the example) we can unambiguously describe the content of the proposition that David thinks might be true as a function of the actual paperweight. But this admission is compatible with my account.

The motivation for my insistence that we should (insofar as possible) characterize David’s state of knowledge, and the exchange of information in the conversation, in terms of real possibilities is that our aim is to try to understand, from our own point of view, what the world was like, or might have been like, according to the participants in the conversation. When you locate the actual paperweight in the possible world that you are using to characterize David’s state of mind, you are locating an essentially wooden object there, and when you add that it is made of plastic, you are taking back that the object in question is an essentially wooden object. Soames agrees that the world in question is metaphysically impossible—on his account it is a conceivable but impossible world-state, and in impossible worlds, things can exist without their essential properties. I think one gets a clearer account of the situation if one sees
this epistemic possibility as a real possibility that is misdescribed, and that is how the two-dimensional story sees it.

Consider a more extreme case: Kripke, in a footnote in *Naming and Necessity*\(^7\) gives an example that goes like this: a mathematician’s wife overhears him talking in his sleep about “Nancy.” She wonders whether Nancy is a woman or perhaps a mathematical object (for example, a certain Lie group). Suppose it is in fact a group but that the wife suspects it is a woman and wonders whether her husband is having an affair with this woman. Consider the epistemically possible world in which Nancy is a woman with whom the mathematician is having an affair. On Soames’s view, there is a conceivable but metaphysically impossible world-state in which it is really Nancy, the mathematical structure, that is a woman with whom the mathematician is having an affair, and this is the world-state that is compatible with the wife’s beliefs. But the point of a representation of an epistemic possibility is to clarify what things are like, according to the person for whom the situation is epistemically possible. If we want to give an accurate idea of what the mathematician’s wife suspects (what kind of situation she suspects she may be in), we should say that she suspects she is in a situation in which it is a woman named “Nancy” that the mathematician is dreaming about and with whom he is having an affair. It does not throw further light on our characterization of the situation to add that this woman is also, in that possible world, something that is essentially a Lie group.

The actual Nancy may nevertheless be relevant to an attribution or description of the mathematician’s wife’s state of belief: Assuming his colleagues know the general story, the mathematician might say, pointing to one of a number of graphic representations on a blackboard of the groups that they are studying, “that’s the one my wife thinks I am having an affair with.” But as I have suggested, I think we have independent reason to separate *de re* belief ascription from the ascription of belief in a singular proposition, in some cases.

Although Soames recommends that one reject the assumption that epistemic possibilities must be metaphysically possible, he does not think this concession will suffice to save the account that he is criticizing. The underlying problem—“the fundamental assumption leading to the failure of the model,” he thinks, is the assumption that the participants in a conversation can “identify, at the time of each utterance, precisely

which possible world states are compatible with everything previously assumed or established” and that they can “determine which of these possible states are compatible with propositions expressed by the sentence [they] utter under different assumptions about which possible context actually obtains.” But this fundamental assumption is mistaken because “the relationship between sentences and the propositions they express is nontransparent in a certain way” (103). We return here to a point that I described at the outset as a point of agreement. To this nontransparency claim, I want emphatically to assent—this is the rejection of what I called intentional foundationalism (acknowledging that there is work to be done to clarify exactly what this doctrine comes to). But I don’t think the fundamental assumption is required by the account that Soames is here criticizing. One can assume that possible worlds are apt for describing states of mind and the flow of information in conversational exchanges without assuming that either theorists or the thinkers and speakers they are theorizing about have some kind of direct acquaintance with possible worlds. Any fact, including facts about the relation between expressions and what they are used to say, and facts about what a possible world fitting some description is like, can be subject to ignorance or error. But even if there is no absolutely neutral standpoint from which we can represent, in terms of a space of possibilities, a state of knowledge and ignorance, all we need, and what we can usually find, is a standpoint that is neutral with respect to the issues at hand. The two-dimensional framework, applied in the unambitious way, is no more than a device for helping us to locate such standpoints and to clarify the interaction of information about the semantics and pragmatics of linguistic expressions with information about the putative subject matter of those expressions.