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# Understanding force cancellation

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## ABSTRACT

To address the Frege-Geach objection, proponents of the ‘forceful’ version of the act-theoretic approach to propositions appeal to the idea of force cancellation. How is that idea to be understood? In this paper, three models of force cancellation are discussed (and their shortcomings pointed out): the mereological model, the Brentanian model, and the – intermediate – transmutation model. Extant versions of these models are meant to account for force cancellation in speech, but they do not easily extend to force cancellation in thought. To overcome that limitation, a psychologistic version of the transmutation model is put forward, based on ‘simulation theory’.



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## 1. Force cancellation and the Frege-Geach argument

According to *act-theoretic* conceptions, propositions are constituted by the act of predicating something of something. The act of predication is what secures the unity of the proposition, by tying together the subject and the predicate. Thus the proposition that Tim is bald is constituted by the act of predicating baldness of Tim. Without that act, there would be no integrated proposition but only a scattered list of propositional elements (namely Tim and baldness).

Predication itself may be construed in two ways: as *forceful* (Hanks 2015) or as *forceless* (Soames 2015). The forceful construal is straightforward: to predicate a property of an object is to ascribe it to that object; it is to present the object as having the property. Predicating baldness of Tim is correct, on that view, only if Tim *is* bald. That construal of

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predication is said to be ‘forceful’ because predicating baldness of Tim is taken to carry certain commitments, namely those that characterise the illocutionary force of *assertion*. As Hanks puts it, ‘acts of predication are judgmental or assertoric in character, and they commit the speaker to things being the way they are represented to be in the act of predication’ (Hanks 2019, 1385).<sup>1</sup> On the ‘forceless’ construal, by contrast, predication is illocutionarily neutral. A proposition may occur ‘now asserted, now unasserted’ (Geach 1965, 449), so predication, insofar as it is constitutive of the proposition, does *not* carry the commitments that are constitutive of assertion – otherwise it wouldn’t be possible for a proposition to occur unasserted. This is an instance of the famous Frege-Geach argument against conflating content and force. Predication is constitutive of content, Soames argues, but assertion is a matter of force: they should be kept apart, and that means that predication has to be construed as forceless.

If one opts for the forceful construal, as I do following Hanks, one has to respond to the Frege-Geach argument, that is, one has to explain how it is possible for a proposition (construed as intrinsically forceful and assertive) to occur unasserted. One can do so by appealing to the notion of *force cancellation*. Thus Hanks writes:

The fact that we do not assert the antecedent or the consequent in an utterance of a conditional (...) is consistent with thinking that an assertoric element is included in the contents of declarative sentences. Frege’s reaction to this fact about conditionals was to hold that the contents of declarative sentences are devoid of any assertive element, but this is not the only reaction one might have. An alternative is to hold that in certain contexts, for example, when a sentence is used inside a conditional, the assertive element is cancelled by the presence of the conditional. (Hanks 2011, 15)

It does not follow from the fact that the actor is not performing assertions, or from the fact that we do not assert the antecedents of conditionals, that propositions are devoid of any assertive element. We can explain what is going on in stage acting and conditionals by invoking the concepts of cancellation contexts and cancelled acts of predication. (Hanks 2015, 98)

As several philosophers readily noticed, however, the notion of force cancellation is somewhat paradoxical. The assertoric component inherent in predication is what secures the unity of the proposition, so it must survive when that proposition is embedded (or expressed by an actor on the

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<sup>1</sup>Like Hanks (2019, 1400), I use ‘assertion’ in a weak, generic sense. An assertion, in that sense, may be qualified or tentative. (It commits the speaker to things being the way they are said to be, but the commitment itself may be qualified or tentative.)

stage), but how can it survive if it is cancelled? (Reiland 2013, 242–243; Hom and Schwartz 2013, 20–21) How is force cancellation to be understood?

## 2. The mereological model

There are different possible models of cancellation. The simplest one, which I call the mereological model, is illustrated by an analogy due to Jinho Kang (2017).

Consider the action of switching on the light. This is performed by pressing the button. But pressing the button turns on the light only if the circumstances are appropriate. If the electric network is out of order, pressing the button won't do anything. So we can distinguish between the *inner act* (pressing the button) and the *outer act* it constitutes when, and only when, the circumstances are appropriate. That outer act, turning on the light, can be modelled as an ordered pair:

Outer act = < inner act, appropriate circumstances >

Or consider another example: raising one's hand at auction. That counts as *bidding*. Here bidding is the outer act, which one performs via the inner act of raising one's hand. Again, the inner act constitutes the outer act only if the circumstances are appropriate.

That distinction between the inner act and the outer act arguably applies to assertion. Predicating a property of an object (the inner act) carries the commitments of full-fledged assertion (the outer act) only if the circumstances are appropriate. If the speaker is joking, or is an actor on the stage, or is making a supposition, or if the sentence which expresses the proposition is embedded in a conditional or a disjunction, the outer act of full-fledged assertion is not performed even though the inner act, viz. predicating the property of the object, is performed. Cancelled assertion is the case in which the inner act is performed but fails to constitute the outer act because the circumstances are not appropriate.

Inappropriate circumstances are what Hanks calls a 'cancelling context'. Cancelled assertion may itself be construed as a kind of outer act, on a par with full-fledged assertion but involving a cancelling context as second component:

Full – fledged assertion = < predication, appropriate circumstances >

Cancelled assertion = < predication, cancelling context >

Both full-fledged assertion and cancelled assertion contain the inner act as a proper part. That is why I call that model of force cancellation the ‘mereological model’: the act of assertion that survives cancellation is the inner act, and it is a proper part of the act of cancelled assertion (a proper part which is *common* to the two varieties of assertion: full-fledged assertion and cancelled assertion).

I take the mereological model to be what Hanks has in mind when he talks of force cancellation. He writes:

Stage acting is a good example of what I mean by a cancellation context. Suppose an actor says ‘Clinton is eloquent’ while acting in a play. In uttering these words the actor does exactly the same sort of thing that Obama does when he asserts that Clinton is eloquent. Both the actor and Obama predicate the property of being eloquent of Clinton. The difference is that when the actor performs this act of predication he is subject to conventions about stage acting that cancel the normal requirements and consequences of acts of predication. The actor has not broken any rules if he does not know that Clinton is eloquent, or if he does not believe that Clinton is eloquent, or if Clinton is not eloquent. The actor does not undertake a commitment to providing reasons for thinking that Clinton is eloquent, and does not authorize others to assert that Clinton is eloquent on the basis of his authority. The actor’s utterance is not subject to the usual requirements on acts of predication, and it does not have the usual consequences of predication. If the actor steps off stage and speaks for himself then all of these requirements and consequences are back in force. The actor moves out of the cancellation context and into one in which acts of predication once again count as assertions. (Hanks 2015, 94)<sup>2</sup>

Simple and appealing though it is, however, the mereological model raises a powerful objection. If the inner act of predication sometimes carries the commitments and consequences of full-fledged assertion (when it is performed in appropriate circumstances) and sometimes not (when it is performed in a ‘cancelling context’), that means that the act in question is not *intrinsically* forceful: it only becomes forceful when it is performed in the right context, that is, when it constitutes full-fledged assertion. Insofar as the inner act is common to the case in which there is (full-fledged) assertion and to the cases in which there isn’t, the inner act has to be construed as intrinsically forceless, rather than forceful. So the force-cancellation defence backfires against the forceful construal it was meant to protect (Reiland 2013).

Can the objection be met? Let us try. First, let us enrich the mereological model by adding a constraint on the inner act. It is of the essence of

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<sup>2</sup>See also Hanks (2019, 1390–1393), especially the American football analogy (1391–1392).

the inner act, arguably, that it is endowed with a purpose or function: the role of the inner act is to serve as a means for performing the outer act. In the auction case, the act of raising one's hand acquires the status of inner act by virtue of the fact that, in the practice of auction, it counts as bidding. But that status, or conventional significance, is independent of whether the outer act is *actually* performed. If the bidder's handraising occurred too late, for example, no bid was actually placed, but the inner act that *was* performed retains its conventional significance (though not the normative consequences that it would normally carry). Likewise, pressing the button or flicking the switch has the function of turning on the light – that's why pressing the button or flicking the switch qualifies as the 'inner act' in that case – and that function it retains whether or not the outer act is actually performed, that is, whether or not the light has effectively been turned on.

Let us now apply this idea to the case of assertion. Remember the argument against the mereological model:

If the inner act of predication sometimes carries the commitments and consequences of full-fledged assertion (when it is performed in the appropriate circumstances) and sometimes not (when it is performed in a 'cancelling context'), that means that the act in question is not *intrinsically* forceful: it only becomes forceful when it is performed in the right context, that is, when it constitutes full-fledged assertion.

The response is that the inner act of predication *is* intrinsically forceful in the sense that it is conceptually inseparable from the outer act of full-fledged assertion it is its function to carry out. In other words, the inner act is defined or characterised in terms of the outer act, whether or not that outer act is actually performed. On the resulting picture, full-fledged assertion comes first. It is a speech act defined by certain constitutive norms (whatever they are). Performing that act necessarily carries the relevant commitments. But there are conventional ways of performing that act: things one does (for example, uttering a declarative sentence such as 'Clinton is eloquent') which normally count as performing the act of full-fledged assertion. Depending on the context, doing these things will or will not amount to full-fledged assertion. Hence the distinction between the outer act, which necessarily carries the commitments, and the inner act which may not. But the inner act retains its conventional significance, whether or not the outer act is actually performed. That conventional significance is due to the fact that the inner act is conceptually associated with the outer act, which it is its function to carry out. It is in

that sense that predication can be said to be ‘intrinsically assertive’ even though it may occur in the absence of full-fledged assertion.

I don’t think that response succeeds in disposing of the objection, however. The response would work if the inner act at issue was the act of uttering a declarative sentence. Declarative sentences are conventionally associated with the speech act of assertion, just as interrogative sentences are conventionally associated with the speech act of questioning and imperative sentences with the speech act of commanding (or something like that). Though not totally uncontroversial, this view is fairly widespread, and we may take it for granted for the sake of the discussion. So there is a sense in which declarative sentences are intrinsically assertive, in virtue of their conventional significance, independently of whether they are actually used to assert. But the inner act we were talking about is the act of predicating, construed as the *forceful* act of ascribing the property to the object. Such an act is said to be correct only if the object has the property. Does the joker or the actor really perform that act? That seems far from obvious to me. I would rather say that the joker or the actor behave *as if* they performed the act – they do utter a declarative sentence, e.g. ‘Clinton is eloquent’, as if they were asserting, but they do not *really* ascribe the property to the object. As Frege puts it, ‘this is only acting, only fiction’ (Frege 1984, 356). Insisting that the joker and the actor do predicate seems to me inconsistent with the *forceful* construal of predication. Things get even worse when we consider cases of embedding. Someone who says ‘It is not the case that Clinton is eloquent’ expresses the proposition that Clinton is eloquent (embedded under negation) but does *not* ascribe the property of eloquence to Clinton – quite the contrary. So in what sense does such a person predicate eloquence of Clinton? *Not* in the forceful sense of actually ascribing the property to her! This is the same objection once again: you can’t both have your cake and eat it. You can’t both have assertion (forceful predication) *and* cancellation. If force is cancelled, what remains has to be forceless.

### 3. The Brentanian model

The mereological model put forward by Hanks is inspired from a well-known passage in which Dummett argues that

The reason [the actor] is not making assertions is not that he is doing *less* than that – merely expressing thoughts, say – but that he is doing *more* than that –

he is acting the making of assertions. What constitutes his doing this is his uttering the assertoric sentence (...) in a context which determines the significance of everything he does in that context – on the stage in a theatre at an announced time. (Dummett 1973, 311)<sup>3</sup>

This talk of ‘more’ rather than ‘less’ suggests that cancelled assertion is *assertion plus something*, where the something else is what cancels the force of the assertion. Hence the mereological model, with its three ingredients: the inner act (assertion simpliciter, a.k.a. forceful predication), the outer act it normally constitutes (full-fledged assertion) and the outer act it constitutes when cancellation takes place (cancelled assertion), both full-fledged assertion and cancelled assertion being considered as *varieties of assertion*.

But there is another model which is suggested by Dummett’s talk of ‘acting the making of assertions’. That alternative model I call ‘Brentanian’ because Brentano and his followers (Marty, Twardowski, etc.) made much of a distinction between two types of adjective–noun combination, the ‘blue box’ type of combination and the ‘fake lemon’ type of combination.<sup>4</sup> A blue box is a box that is blue. But a fake lemon, or a plastic lemon, is not (really) a lemon. Likewise, a simulated robbery is not a (real) robbery. In that sort of case, Brentano and the Brentanians say, the noun is semantically *modified*: it no longer denotes what it used to denote prior to the modification. The mereological model treats cancelled assertion as an instance of the first type. Just as a blue box is a box, an act of cancelled assertion is (or contains) an act of assertion. What I am calling the Brentanian model rejects that assumption. On the Brentanian model, a simulated assertion is no more an assertion than a plastic lemon is a (real) lemon. A simulated assertion, and more generally a simulated *X*, is like an *X* in many ways, but it is not an *X*.

That simulated assertion is a ‘modification’, rather than a variety, of assertion seems to follow from what Dummett says in the passage in which he spells out his conception of what acting involves:

Of the actions performed by a character in a play, the actor who takes that role for the most part really does those which are not conventional (...): for example, the actor *really* shakes hands with someone. But if some action is considered under a description which applies to an action only in virtue of the existence of some convention, we do not say that the actor really does it: for example,

<sup>3</sup>Peter Hanks generally cites or alludes to this passage when discussing cancellation. See for example Hanks (2015, 93–95; 2019, 1389, 1390).

<sup>4</sup>For references, see Claas and Schnieder (2019). I owe to Maria van der Schaar the idea of appealing to the Brentanian notion of modification to characterize the second model of force cancellation.



in shaking hands with someone, the actor does not really *greet* him. (Dummett 1973, 310–311; emphasis mine)

The actor does not (really) *greet* the person he shakes hand with, Dummett says; nor, presumably, does the actor (really) *assert* that *p* when he says, or makes as if to say, that *p* on the stage. What the actor actually does is something else, namely *act or simulate the performance of the relevant action* (assertion, greetings). The actor does this by engaging in the kind of behaviour (e.g. shaking hands with someone) that would be exemplified if the action was real rather than simulated.

On the Brentanian model, it is true that the actor who plays Obama's role and says 'Clinton is eloquent' 'does exactly the same sort of thing that Obama does when he asserts that Clinton is eloquent' (Hanks 2015, 94): he engages in the same type of behaviour, for acting purposes. But is it true that 'both the actor and Obama predicate the property of being eloquent of Clinton' (id.)? Again, not in the forceful sense of 'predicate'. The actor does not really ascribe the property to Clinton – he only simulates that act, and a simulated *F* is no more an *F* than a plastic lemon is a lemon.

The problem with the Brentanian model is that what unifies the proposition can no longer be the *forceful* act of predication since no such act is performed when the proposition is not asserted. Again, we find that the force-cancellation defence backfires against the forceful construal it was meant to protect.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. The transmutation model

Did Dummett endorse the mereological model (as the talk of 'more' rather than 'less' suggests) or the Brentanian model (as suggested by his insistence that the actor does not greet the person he shakes hands with on the stage)? I think he was defending a hybrid model blending features from both. That hybrid model I call the transmutation model.

Even in the passage in which he insists on the difference between acting the performance of an action and actually performing it, there are indications that Dummett takes the simulated action to be performed, though in a special way. Here is the passage in full:

Of the actions performed by a character in a play, the actor who takes that role for the most part really does those which are not conventional (...): for example,

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<sup>5</sup>See Section 5 for a defence of the Brentanian model against that objection.

the actor *really* shakes hands with someone. But if some action is considered under a description which applies to an action only in virtue of the existence of some convention, we do not say that the actor really does it: for example, in shaking hands with someone, the actor does not really *greet* him. This is not, however, because the actor is like someone from another culture who is not observing the convention: rather, it is because **he is performing the conventional action in a context which is governed by a further convention** — that of dramatic representation. This is indeed a convention — a special language-game (...). But it is not a language-game on the same level as, e.g. those of asking questions and giving commands. It is a convention which governs **all the actions, conventional as well as non-conventional, which the actor performs within the context of the play**, and endows them with a particular significance: and it does this to the conventional actions in virtue of the conventions which ordinarily govern them. Not any old way of shaking hands will do: the actor must shake hands in the way which, in the absence of any context governed by a special convention, would constitute a greeting. (Dummett 1973, 310–311; emphasis mine)

Dummett's description of the case develops in two steps. He starts by distinguishing the non-conventional action or behaviour (e.g. shaking hands with someone) and the conventional action one thereby performs (greeting), and points out that the conventional action is not really performed when the non-conventional action is performed on the stage in the course of acting the performance of the conventional action. This is what suggests a departure from the mereological model, and a move toward the Brentanian model. But – second step – Dummett emphasises that the simulative action (simulated greeting) is performed by *actually performing the conventional action* (greeting) in a special context governed by a further, higher-level convention. That means that the conventional action of greeting *is* performed, though in a special way which affects its overall significance: the actor, Dummett says, 'is performing the conventional action in a context which is governed by a *further* convention – that of dramatic representation'. In other words, just as the first-level convention assigns the non-conventional behaviour (shaking hands) the status of a certain conventional action (greeting), the higher-level convention assigns *that conventional action* (greeting) the status of another conventional action, of a higher order (playing the part of someone who greets):

*First-level convention*

shaking hands → greeting

*Higher-level convention*

(Shaking hands → greeting) → simulated greeting

As we might put it, the higher-level convention *transmutes* the conventional action which the actor performs on the stage (greeting) into *another*, higher-level conventional action (acting the part of someone who greets) with a totally different significance. Because of that transmutation, it can be maintained that the actor does not really greet the person he shakes hands with: what he does is simulate greeting. That is in accordance with the Brentanian model. But simulated greeting itself can be analysed as conforming to the mereological model. Dummett speaks of ‘all the actions, conventional as well as non-conventional, which the actor performs within the context of the play’. This suggests that the actor not only shakes hands with his partner (non-conventional action), but also greets her (conventional action), with the qualification that the conventional action is assigned a new status by virtue of the higher-level convention: it is no longer a genuine greeting, as it would be in a normal context, but a simulated greeting. Hence the idea that the actor is doing more rather than less: he is performing the conventional action of greeting, but in a context governed by a higher-level convention which gives a new significance to the action and changes its normative status, thus cancelling its normal significance.

Does Dummett succeed in making room for a hybrid position, a mixture of the Brentanian model and the mereological model? I don’t think so. His attempt is suggestive but not actually successful. Let us see why.

Dummett acknowledges that the actor *acts* or *simulates* the performance of the first-level conventional act (e.g. greeting). This is in accordance with the Brentanian model, which stresses the difference between simulating the act and actually performing it. At the same time, Dummett insists that the actor does not merely perform the *non-conventional* act of shaking hands; for the actor clearly invokes the first-level convention when she acts the performance of a conventional action such as greeting or asserting. As Dummett rightly points out, the act of simulated greeting or simulated assertion the actor accomplishes is *a function of the conventional act that normally corresponds to the behaviour she engages in*. Dummett concludes, in line with the mereological model, that the first-level conventional act (greeting or assertion) *is* performed, though in a special context which cancels its normal significance. But this conclusion seems to me unsupported. From the fact that the act of simulated greeting or simulated assertion the actor accomplishes is a function of the

conventional act that normally corresponds to the behaviour she engages in, the only thing that follows is that the actor intentionally behaves in a way which, by convention, counts as the performance of that act. In particular, the actor who, onstage, utters a declarative sentence such as ‘Clinton is eloquent’ *intentionally behaves in a way which, by convention, counts as the performance of an assertion* (namely, the assertion that Clinton is eloquent). *This* is the ‘inner act’ the actor performs, an act which, in a different context (i.e. offstage), would count as a genuine assertion. But if this is the inner act, then the objection I raised to the mereological model in section 2 still holds. The inner act, thus construed, is *not* the act of assertion or forceful predication. By uttering a declarative sentence, the speaker *signifies* that an assertion is being made. The assertive significance of the speaker’s utterance is due to the convention which associates declarative sentences and assertion, a convention which, as I have just said, the actor invokes when he acts the making of assertions. But signifying assertion is not the same thing as asserting. That is the problem which the mereological model faces. The mereological model *equates* the inner act and the act of asserting (the latter being what unifies the proposition, on the forceful construal). Yet the act of asserting is not really performed: the speaker goes through the motions of asserting, but ‘transmutation’ occurs and what she ends up performing is a quite different act, that of simulating assertion. What is uncontroversially performed is only the act of behaving as if one were asserting. So we are back to the Brentanian model: the attempt to steer a middle course between the two models seems to fail.<sup>6</sup>

## 5. The Brentanian model revisited

In an earlier paper (Recanati 2019), I offered an account of force cancellation squarely based on the Brentanian model. Let us grant that the speaker who acts the making of an assertion does *not* assert (contrary to the mereological model), but only simulates assertion by behaving in a way which normally counts as asserting. The speaker performs an inner act, which is *not* the act of assertion or forceful predication (again, contrary to the mereological model), but the act of signifying assertion. In appropriate circumstances, performing that act – the locutionary act of saying that  $p$  – amounts to asserting, but in cancelling contexts it does not: the assertion which is projected by the utterance in

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<sup>6</sup>See Section 6 for a defence of the transmutation model, from a philosophy of mind perspective.

virtue of its conventional meaning is not endorsed by the speaker. That is particularly obvious in the case of irony: the speaker says, or makes as if to say, that  $p$ , thereby presenting an act of assertion that  $p$  as being performed; but she dissociates or distances herself from that act. The act of assertion is not performed, but implicitly ascribed to some other agent (the target of the speaker's irony). Even though, in that framework, one denies that the act of simulated assertion is or contains an assertion on the part of the speaker who performs that act, still we can maintain that what unifies the proposition, even when it is not asserted (as in the case of irony), is an act of assertion or forceful predication. That act is not *performed* by the speaker, however: it is signified by her utterance of a declarative sentence, that is, projected by the utterance in virtue of its conventional meaning. According to my proposal, the act of assertion signified by the utterance is what ties together the subject and the predicate. The predicated property is presented as ascribed to the object referred to by the subject phrase, even though the speaker herself does not endorse that ascription.

After presenting the Brentanian model in section 3, I wrote: 'The problem with [that] model is that what unifies the proposition can no longer be the forceful act of predication since no such act is performed when the proposition is not asserted'. The theory advocated in Recanati (2019) offers a solution to *that* problem. What unifies the proposition *can* be a forceful act of predication, without the act in question being performed by the speaker who expresses the proposition. What unifies the proposition may be the forceful act of predication *projected by the utterance in virtue of its conventional meaning*. (See Bronzo 2021 for a similar view, also based on the notion of simulation.)

But my proposal suffers from a limitation which also affects the accounts offered by Hanks and Dummett, and which I briefly mentioned in the Appendix to Recanati (2019).<sup>7</sup> The idea that the inner act consists in behaving in a way which, by convention, counts as the performance of an assertion only applies to the type of force cancellation that occurs in speech when one utters a sentence expressing a proposition without actually asserting that proposition. But the phenomenon of force cancellation is not limited to language and to the use of conventional means for performing speech acts. Propositions are not only the content of speech acts; they are also the content of propositional attitudes such as belief or mental acts such as judgment. If what unifies a singular proposition (e.g.

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<sup>7</sup>See Bronzo (2021, 3110) for similar remarks.

the proposition that Clinton is eloquent) is the forceful act of predicating the property of the object, then what happens when that proposition is merely entertained? If no act of judgment takes place, and no speech act takes place, where does the inherently judgmental character of the proposition come from? At this point, it is no use to invoke conventions, since conventions have no role to play in thought.<sup>8</sup>

## 6. The transmutation model revisited: cancellation as decoupling

Conventions have no role to play in thought, but it is customary to distinguish types of mental representation by the functional role they play within the mental economy. Thus beliefs, or credal representations, have the function of representing the environment in order to guide action. That function endows them with correctness conditions: a belief is correct (true) just in case the environment is as the belief represents it as being. The forming of a belief is a judgment, and judgment is what, in the mental realm, corresponds to assertion.<sup>9</sup> When judgment occurs, a representation of a state of affairs enters the ‘belief box’. That means that the subject believes the state of affairs to obtain (and is disposed to act accordingly).

The content of a belief (or judgment) is a proposition. What secures the unity of that proposition? The forceful theorist has to say that what secures the unity is the act of judgment through which the subject ascribes the property to the object. In other words, the content of the judgment (and of the resulting belief) is not independent of the act of judging, as in Frege’s theory, but is constituted in the act of judging, as in Russell’s ‘multiple relation’ theory of judgment.

The problem, once again, is that propositions can be merely entertained: we can imagine something to be the case, or make a supposition.

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<sup>8</sup>According to Hanks, force cancellation is

social & interpersonal. When you say ‘if  $p$  then  $q$ ’ you are not committed to  $p$  or  $q$ . This notion of commitment is largely social: you are not obligated to defend  $p$  against challenges, others are not licensed to assert  $p$  on the basis of your testimony, and so on. (personal communication)

This ‘social’ construal of force cancellation falls prey to the objection I have just raised: it is too limited and cannot account for the phenomenon of force cancellation in thought. Hence the need for a more psychologistic account, such as that I offer in Section 6.

<sup>9</sup>‘Judgment’ here is to be understood in a weak, minimal sense (much as ‘assertion’ is – see footnote 1). To judge, in that sense, is to take a stand on whether the object one refers to has the property one predicates of it, but to judge in that sense one doesn’t necessarily have to have ‘considered the question (...) and taken a reflective stand in the light of one’s evidence’ (Reiland 2019a, footnote 4). On the distinction between the two senses of ‘judgment’, see Reiland (2019b). (As Reiland points out, Hanks too uses ‘judgment’ in the minimal sense.)

No judgment takes place in such cases, so where does the unity of the proposition come from? Is the act of imagining or supposing another kind of mental act which, like judgment, has the power to unify the proposition? But if so, that means that it is not true that ‘acts of predication are judgmental (...) in character, and (...) commit the speaker to things being the way they are represented to be in the act of predication’ (Hanks 2019, 1385). Rather, acts of predication have to be construed as forceless since they take place not only when the subject is judging, but also when he is merely imagining or supposing (without undergoing any commitment to things being the way they are represented to be in the act of predication).

At this point, of course, the forceful theorist should once again appeal to the idea of force cancellation. They should maintain that acts of predication are judgmental in character, but say that the intrinsic doxastic force of a proposition is cancelled when that proposition is the content of an act of imagining or supposing.

What does force cancellation amount to, in the mental realm? I propose that it corresponds to an operation that both philosophers of fiction and philosophers of mind or psychologists interested in pretence and mindreading have talked about at length: the operation of *decoupling*.<sup>10</sup> When one reads a fictional sentence (in a novel) the state of affairs which the sentence describes is represented as holding, just as it is when one reads a piece of genuine testimony. The representation is forceful, rather than devoid of doxastic force (Recanati 2021). But in the case of fiction, a *further* operation takes place: the representation itself is *tagged as fictional*. Tagging the representation in this way cancels its doxastic force by severing some of its connections to behavioural output and to the rest of the doxastic system. (This is ‘decoupling’.) In other words, the representation, despite its intrinsically judgmental character, does not go into the belief box, but into a separate workspace for representing the content of the fiction.<sup>11</sup> Such a separate workspace, which Nichols and Stich (2000, 2003) call the ‘possible world box’, is the key to understanding simulative activities such as planning, mindreading, pretend play, and hypothetical reasoning.

On this view, imaginings or suppositions are not mental states on a par with beliefs; rather, they are the simulation of belief. According to so-called simulation theorists, the ability to make judgments, draw inferences etc. is exercised ‘off-line’ when one imagines or supposes.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>The terminology traces back to Leslie (1987). See Cosmides and Tooby (2000) for an evolutionary perspective on decoupling considered as one of the most important features of human cognition.

<sup>11</sup>For a formal account of fictional decoupling within a Stalnakerian framework, see Semeijn (2017).

Because it is the same mental ability that is redeployed off-line, imagining that  $p$  is

belief-like in respect of inferential role: imagining that  $P$  leads to new imaginings in the way that believing  $P$  would lead to new beliefs. Beliefs also enter into practical inferences, where they combine with desires to produce decisions. Imaginative projections can (...) involve the recreation of practical inference: we imagine ourselves in this situation and then, in imagination, we decide to do something. (Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, 19–20)

But there are also functional differences, which are explained by the operation of decoupling. For example, the inferential connections to other beliefs are not exploited in an unrestricted manner, but in a restricted manner corresponding to the idea that the beliefs that are merely simulated are ‘quarantined’ and do not freely interact with the rest of the subject’s belief system (Leslie 1987; Harris 1995). Hence the idea of a separate workspace for those credal representations that are tagged and prevented from going into the belief box. These representations are belief-like, hence forceful, at the basic level, yet their doxastic force is cancelled through the operation of tagging/decoupling.

On this view, imaginings are credal representations – representations issued from an act of judgment – that have undergone an operation of decoupling which cancels their doxastic force. Representations issued from an act of judgment are normally endowed with a certain functional role: they go into the belief box, which means that they can be freely exploited in theoretical and practical inference. Decoupling, however, modifies that functional role by considerably restricting the way the representation can be exploited: the representation is not fed into the belief box, but into a separate workspace corresponding to the tag. Because it is not in the belief box, the representation cannot be acted upon, nor can it freely interact with the rest of the subject’s doxastic system.

This idea that, through decoupling, the functional role of the representation is modified is very much like Dummett’s idea that a conventional action (greeting) is transmuted into another type of action (simulated greeting) when the conventional action is performed in the context of a play. Indeed, Gregory Currie, one of the leading simulation theorists, uses the transmutation metaphor in describing the simulation relation between belief and imagination:

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<sup>12</sup>This terminology originates from Gordon (1986). On the simulation theory, see the papers collected in the two volumes edited by Martin Davies and Tony Stone (Davies and Stone 1995a, 1995b) and in Carruthers and Smith (ed.) (1996). See also Currie and Ravenscroft (2002) and Goldman (2006) for synthetic overviews.



Simulation transmutes beliefs into imaginings. (...) Believing that it will rain has certain connections to perception and behaviour which, if they are severed, transmutes the belief into a case of imagining that it will rain. (Currie 1995, 149)

One advantage of this theory is that it arguably extends to the cases in which a proposition is a constituent of a more complex proposition (Recanati 2022). When, for example, the subject judges that if  $p$ , then  $q$ , or judges that  $p$  or  $q$ , the proposition that  $p$  and the proposition that  $q$  are entertained without being assented to: they are entertained qua constituents of the complex proposition that is the content of judgment. According to the theory, however, entertaining a proposition always embeds a judgmental or credal component. Entertaining a proposition involves *representing the situation it describes as holding*, and this is a temporary form of acceptance (Gilbert 1991). But when the proposition is only a constituent in a more complex proposition, cancellation (tagging/decoupling) occurs: the proposition is not believed, but 'merely' entertained.

## 7. Conclusion

The transmutation model I have finally argued for is a synthesis of the other two models. The starting point is Hanks' claim that an assertoric or judgmental act is involved whenever a proposition is expressed or entertained, even if the proposition in question is not asserted (but 'merely' entertained). In instances of mere entertaining, the subject only *simulates* the act of assertion or judgment, in conformity to the Brentanian model (Recanati 2019; Bronzo 2021). At the same time, simulated assertion/judgment itself is analysed as having two components, in conformity to the mereological model. The first component is the basic assertoric/judicative act, and the second component is the decoupling operation that cancels its doxastic force.

As the failure of Dummett's attempt shows (section 4), steering a middle course between the Brentanian model and the mereological model is not easy to do. It seems that one has to choose: in instances of mere entertaining, either the act of assertion/judgment is performed (as per the mereological model) or it is merely simulated (as per the Brentanian model). The transmutation model attempts to preserve both claims despite their apparent inconsistency, and manages to do so thanks to the distinction between the basic assertoric/judicative act and the act of full-fledged assertion/judgment. *Full-fledged assertion/judgment*

*takes place only if no decoupling occurs.* It contrasts with cancelled or simulated assertion/judgment (in which decoupling occurs), but they both involve the basic assertoric/judicative act without which there would be no propositional content in the first place. So, in instances of mere entertaining, it is true both that the (basic) act of assertion/judgment is performed, as per the mereological model, *and* that the act of (full-fledged) assertion/judgment is not performed but merely simulated, as per the Brentanian model.

That distinction between levels is sufficient to dispose of Bronzo's argument to the effect that what he calls the Hybrid Theory – a view which he rightly ascribes to me – is inconsistent. The Hybrid Theory combines the 'Spinozist Thesis' that asserted thoughts are conceptually prior to unasserted thoughts (since the latter are analysed as the *simulation* of the former) and what Geach calls the Frege Point, to the effect that the same proposition 'may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same proposition' (Geach 1965, 449). According to Bronzo, however, 'the only way to vindicate the Spinozist Thesis is to give up the Frege Point' (Bronzo 2021, 3114).<sup>13</sup> In other words,

There is no room for a position like Hanks' and Recanatì's, which seeks to allow for the forceless entertainment or expression of propositional contents while vindicating the conceptual priority of judgments and assertions. Once we grant the possibility of the forceless entertainment or expression of propositional contents — contents that can also be judged or asserted — we inevitably construe judgments or assertions as composite phenomena consisting of two ingredients: the conceptually prior expression or entertainment of a propositional content, plus something conferring judgmental or assertoric force. (Bronzo 2021, 3101)

Why is that so? Bronzo spells out his argument as follows:

The Hybrid View wants to accept the Frege Point. For the Frege Point, there is a truth-evaluable common factor between the asserted and unasserted thought. Moreover, the only difference between the two is that in one case the common

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<sup>13</sup>Bronzo bites the bullet and rejects the Frege Point: he denies that the same proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted. According to Bronzo, when a 'proposition' occurs unasserted, it is not a genuine, truth-evaluable proposition, but a simulative *ersatz*. On this view, the validity of *modus ponens* ('If p then q; p; therefore q') is not due to the *identity* of the propositions occurring unasserted in the first premise and asserted in the second premise and the conclusion (as Geach claims). The inference is valid because what the antecedent and the consequent of the conditional *simulate* are the propositions respectively asserted in the second premise and the conclusion. – Although I agree with Bronzo that embedded occurrences (such as the antecedent of a conditional, or a disjunct in a disjunction) are simulations, I see no reason to deny, as he does, that they carry truth-evaluable content. For me, the content of an embedded occurrence *just is* the content of the assertion it simulates.

factor is asserted, while in the other case it is not. The truth-evaluable common factor is therefore forceless. An unasserted thought is a thought *simpliciter*, conceived as truth evaluable and forceless, while an asserted thought is a thought, thus conceived, plus assertoric force. (...) But at this point, there is no room left for the claim that asserted thoughts are conceptually prior to unasserted thoughts. The conceptually fundamental notion is that of an unasserted thought, since the notion of an asserted thought is defined in terms of it rather than the other way around. (Bronzo 2021, 3116–3117)

But this argument rests on an equivocation. From the Frege Point, to the effect that there is a truth-evaluable common factor, the thought, that is asserted in one case and unasserted in the other, it does *not* follow that the thought in question is ‘forceless’ in the strong sense that is relevant to the debate over the Spinozist Thesis. When a proposition is merely entertained, it is forceless only in the (weak) sense that it is not the content of an act of *full-fledged assertion/judgment*: the speaker or thinker merely simulates the assertion of that proposition (because cancellation/decoupling occurs). Still the proposition is not forceless in the strong sense, for it owes its existence to the basic act of assertion/judgment which *is* performed even when cancellation/decoupling occurs (since cancellation/decoupling operates on that basic act). The basic act in question, along with the proposition it constitutes, is the common factor shared by full-fledged assertion and mere entertaining.<sup>14</sup>

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