I thought Marshall Willman’s talk was excellent and I think I agreed with almost everything. I also learned some things about Chinese philosophy that I did not know. I have a few additional comments I would like to make. First, you can have the same phenomenon in English without an anaphoric pronoun. So I can say, using his example,

(2) About the snake in the road, Theodore believes it won’t bite people.

But there is another English sentence which does not have an anaphoric pronoun, but which I think most English speakers would interpret as a de re report:

(2*) The snake in the road, Theodore believes, won’t bite people.

That is, I think that sentence would be given an interpretation which is equivalent to his de re (2).

And the reason is that by syntactically moving the subject to the front of the sentence 2* allows for a semantic interpretation where they reference is outside the scope of “believes”. And 2* example seems to have the same type of topic-comment character that he was citing for Chinese. Both of these sentences seem to commit the speaker to the existence of a snake in the road. So I don’t think there is such a big difference between English and Chinese, because you can do the same in English, you can knock out the anaphoric pronoun.

What is actually going on in these cases? Well I think the confusion is, as I said in the book he cites, between features of reports of beliefs and features of beliefs. There definitely are de dicto reports and de re reports, and clearly there is a distinction. So if I say: “You know that snake in the road. About that snake in the road, Theodore believes it won’t bite people,” This is a de re report, but if I say, “Theodore believes that the snake in the road won’t bite people,” that is a de dicto report. But the real mistake is in supposing that because there are different kinds of reports of beliefs there must be different kinds of beliefs. And the decisive argument is that the distinction is not one Theodore can make. That
is, I say to Theodore, “Theodore do you believe the snake in the road won’t bite people?” He says, “Oh no John, you ask me if I have a de dicto belief. I don’t believe that the snake in the road won’t bite people. What I believe is about the snake in the road, it won’t bite people, and that is a de re belief.” I cannot hear any difference in Theodore’s commitment in the two cases. That is, if there is a distinction between two different kinds of beliefs, then Theodore should be able to make that distinction, and he can’t. Theodore says, “About the snake in the road I believe it won’t bite people.” Or he says, “I believe the snake in the road won’t bite people.” Those are exactly the same belief from Theodore’s point of view because any circumstance in which one is true will be a circumstance in which the other is true. Now it can’t be a difference in two kinds of belief if Theodore himself can’t make the distinction. So why do we make the distinction? Well, I think Willman gave a very good answer to that: because sometimes we want to focus our attention on the thing that the belief is about and commit ourselves as reporters to the existence of that thing. In other cases we don’t.

There is another mistake that the philosophers I am criticizing make, that Willman did not point out, but that I want to call attention to now. They think that the fact that corresponds to a belief statement is that the speaker stands in a relation to a proposition. They think that belief reports are like standard reports of relations such as the relation described if I say, “The book is on top of the table.” On this view, if I say, “Theodore believes that the snake won’t bite people.” I am reporting a relation between Theodore and a proposition. I believe that this is a deep mistake. The word “belief” does not name a relation between me and a proposition, because the belief just is the proposition as believed. The proposition is not the object of the belief, but its content. Belief doesn’t name a relation between a believer and something else. But once you make that mistake, once you think “belief” names a two place relation, then it is easy to believe that there might be beliefs that are three place relations. Then you get the conclusion that there must be de re belief. On my account, the view that the verb “believe” names a relation is another source of the mistake involved in believing that there are two kinds of belief, de re and de dicto. In line with what he was saying, that is another grammatical source of the mistake.

There are two things he said that I think I disagree with, but it is quite possible I may simply be misunderstanding him. He says that