

Facts, properties, and the nature of the proposition

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Abstract

I argue that the best way to solve Russell's problem of the relationship between propositions and their constituents is to think of propositions as properties of worlds. I argue that this view preserves the strengths and avoids some of the weaknesses of the views of the proposition as a kind of fact defended by the early Russell and by Jeff King in his *The Nature and Structure of Content*. I argue that the view, in addition, promises to provide an explanation of the representational properties of propositions and the nature of the distinction between indexical and non-indexical thought. I conclude by discussing some problems about how to think about the semantics of propositional attitude ascriptions, if a view of this sort is correct.

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1 PROPOSITIONS AND THEIR CONSTITUENTS

Most contemporary work in semantics aims to assign propositions as the semantic contents of sentences, relative to contexts of utterance. Many philosophers of language think, further, that words and phrases, as well as sentences, have semantic contents relative to contexts of utterance, and that these contents bear some intimate relation to the propositions expressed by sentences containing these expressions.

Some features of this ‘intimate relation’ may be brought out by example. Consider the proposition that a certain pen cap is blue. Call this proposition PROP. Then the following seem to be true:

Necessarily, anyone who entertains a thought with content PROP entertains a thought about that particular pen cap.

Necessarily, anyone who entertains a thought with content PROP entertains the thought of some object that it has the property of being blue.

As I will use the term, the truth of the above claims is sufficient for the particular pen cap and the property of being blue to be *constituents* of PROP. And, in general, an object o will be a constituent of p if a formula relevantly like the first one above is a necessary truth; the property F will be a constituent of p if a formula relevantly like the second one above is a necessary truth. Similar remarks are in order for relations and other potential constituents of propositions.¹

This way of putting things presupposes a particular (Russellian) view about what sorts of thing the constituents of propositions are. But the foregoing could be restated to accommodate other views; for example, a Fregean will want to replace talk about objects as constituents of propositions with talk about individual concepts, and will want to replace talk about properties and relations with talk about modes of presentation of those properties and relations. Nothing in what follows will depend upon one choice or another here, though I will stick with the Russellian view for simplicity of exposition.

It is worth emphasizing that the way in which we have introduced the term ‘constituent’ does not imply anything very substantial about the relationship between propositions and these constituents — not, for example, that the relationship between propositions and their constituents is the same as or even analogous to the relationship between material things and their parts. It should, I think, be fairly uncontroversial that propositions have constituents, in the above sense, even if it is far from uncontroversial what those constituents are.

Much of the disagreement in contemporary semantics takes the form of disagreement about what sort of things the constituents of propositions are. But, as is well known, a resolution of these debates would still leave unanswered some difficult questions about the nature of propositions. In particular, it would leave unanswered the question of what propositions are, and how they are related to their constituents.

2 RUSSELL AND THE PROBLEM OF THE UNITY OF THE PROPOSITION

An initial thought might be that, once we’ve enumerated the constituents of a proposition, there simply is nothing more to say about what that proposition is: propositions are nothing over and above their constituents.

One way to bring out the insufficiency of this initial thought, which is due to the Russell of the *Principles of Mathematics*, is to note that sometimes substitution of one expression for another with the same content — can transform a sentence — which expresses a proposition relative to a context — into a string of words which does not express a proposition. As Russell says, “By transforming the verb, as it occurs in a proposition, into a verbal noun, the whole proposition can be turned into

a single logical subject, no longer asserted, and no longer containing in itself truth or falsehood.” (§52) To use one of his examples,

A differs from B

expresses a proposition and has a truth-value, whereas

A difference B

does not express a proposition. But, intuitively, this is puzzling; for surely ‘differs’ and ‘difference’ have the same content, each being terms for the relation *difference*. But then how can the former string of words express a proposition, and the latter not?²

Russell’s problem might seem to be in the first instance a problem about *sentences*: it is the problem of explaining what it takes for one string of words to be proposition-expressing, while another is not. But it is plausible (though not uncontroversial³) that there is a correlative puzzle here about propositions: it is the problem of saying what propositions could be, such that one is expressed by the first string of words above but not the second. What Russell’s example seems to show is that the proposition expressed by a sentence, while intimately connected with the entities which are the contents of the expressions which make up that sentence, must be something over and above those contents. If they were not, any two strings of words alike with respect to the propositional constituents corresponding to their parts would always be such that both or neither expressed a proposition.

On this way of viewing Russell’s remarks, they are not especially concerned with the *unity* of the proposition, but just are a particularly vivid way of bringing out a challenge to friends of propositions: the challenge of saying what propositions could be, such that they are both intimately related to and also something over and above their constituents. This challenge can also be brought out, albeit in a less dramatic way, by consideration of pairs of sentences involving predicates which express non-symmetric relations, like ‘John loves Jane’ and ‘Jane loves John.’ These clearly express distinct propositions; but these propositions seem to have the same constituents. This seems again to indicate that propositions must be, even if intimately related to, distinct from their constituents.⁴

3 PRIMITIVE PROPOSITIONS

One might accept Russell’s argument for the conclusion that propositions must be something over and above their constituents without thinking that Russell’s challenge to explain what this ‘something more’ consists in can be given any answer more informative than this: that propositions are *sui generis* simple abstract objects distinct from any of their constituents.

This view of propositions as primitive is a difficult view to refute; but I think that it does come with some costs. One obvious such cost involves ontological parsimony. Any view which takes propositions as a *sui generis* type of abstract object will be committed to the existence of one more category of abstract object than a view which assimilates propositions to entities of some other category, like sets, facts, or properties.⁵

A more serious problem, in my view, is that a view of propositions as primitive is unable to offer any explanation of the sorts of necessary truths used to introduce talk of constituents above, or necessary truths about the truth conditions of propositions, like (to use the example above) the necessary truth that PROP is true if and only if a particular object — the pen cap in question — instantiates the property of being blue.⁶ If propositions have no internal structure, and there is nothing to be said about their nature beyond negative claims to the effect that they are not to be assimilated to entities of any other category, then the connections between propositions, their constituents, and their truth conditions must be accepted as brute necessities. But one might reasonably think that a theory of propositions should explain why, for instance, some propositions but not others are such that anyone who believes them must believe of some object that it instantiates the property of being blue.⁷

Even if convincing, these are the sorts of arguments which should count against a view only in the presence of otherwise plausible alternatives. In the remainder of this paper, I will focus only on theories of the proposition which do not take propositions as primitive, and instead try to tell us something about the relationship between propositions and their constituents.

4 RUSSELL ON THE NATURE OF THE PROPOSITION

In the sections of the *Principles* in which he discusses the problem of the relationship between propositions and their constituents, Russell made two quite different attempts to provide a theory of propositions. His first attempt was to explain the difference between strings of words such as

A differs from *B*
A difference *B*

in terms of the mode of combination of the constituents of the proposition expressed by the first. As he put it,

“The twofold nature of the verb, as actual verb and as verbal noun, may be expressed, if all verbs are held to be relations, as the difference between a relation in itself and a relation actually relating. Consider, for example, the proposition ‘*A* differs from *B*’. The constituents of this proposition, if we analyze it, appear to be only *A*, difference, *B*. Yet these constituents, thus placed side by side, do not reconstitute the proposition. The difference which occurs in the proposition actually relates *A* and *B* ...”
 (§54)

While Russell’s distinction between relations in themselves and relations actually relating can sound a bit obscure, his point is clear enough: the proposition expressed by ‘*A* differs from *B*’ is not simply a list of two objects and a relation, but rather two objects connected by, or standing in, that relation. In the case of a monadic predication, the analogous move would be to say that the proposition is not simply a list of an object and the property, but rather the object’s instantiating that property. Because every proposition includes a property or relation, this strategy will always be available.

An analogy might help. Consider the distinction between facts, thought of as an object or objects having a property or standing in a relation. Facts, so understood, have constituents — objects, properties, and relations — but are something over and above their constituents. The fact that Bob is tall involves something more than the mere existence of Bob and the property of being tall; it is a matter of Bob's *being* tall. Of course, if this makes the proposed solution to the problem of the nature of the proposition clearer, it also makes clear why the solution fails. By assimilating the proposition expressed by 'A differs from B' to the fact of A's differing from B, Russell's reliance on 'relations actually relating' makes the existence of false propositions impossible; there can be no such thing as A's differing from B unless it is true — unless it is a fact — that A does differ from B.⁸

Russell's second response to the problem, which he mentions only in passing, is the suggestion that "There appears to be an ultimate notion of assertion, given by the verb, which is lost as soon as we substitute a verbal noun . . ." (§52) There's one important similarity, and one important dissimilarity, between this and the treatment of 'A differs from B' discussed above.

This similarity is that, in each case, Russell appeals to a relation's holding between the constituents of the proposition to explain the identity of the proposition. The difference is that, in this case, the relation in question is not the content of any expression in the sentence, but rather an 'ultimate notion of assertion' which is, it seems, a multigrade relation which holds between the constituents of every proposition. To continue the example discussed above, the proposition expressed by 'A differs from B' would then be the difference relation's *being asserted of* A and B. Assertion is a relation that really holds between difference, A, and B.

Russell's choice of assertion as the relation which binds together the constituents of the proposition was a poor one. Assertion is just one among several attitudes which one might take toward a proposition; propositions can exist unasserted, just as they can exist without being believed, or without being known. As such, propositions can hardly be defined in terms of this attitude.⁹ But the general strategy is promising: by finding some relation which actually holds between the constituents of a proposition, we can understand propositions as a particular sort of fact, which are unified by a relation which really holds between the constituents of the proposition; by letting this relation be something other than the relations (if any) which are constituents of the proposition, we can understand propositions as facts without assimilating them to the facts which would make those propositions true.

This sort of view of propositions as facts has, over views which take propositions as primitive, the advantage of parsimony. Many believe in facts on independent grounds; it would be nice if believing in propositions didn't commit us to an extra category of entities. But despite this advantage, one thing should be clear: if we're to solve the problem of the nature of the proposition in this way, we need to come up with a more plausible candidate for the needed unifying relation than the relation of assertion.

One might think, however, that the way in which Russell raised the problem of the nature of the proposition gives us a clue about where we should look: the challenge was to explain what propositions could be such that 'A differs from B' expresses one, whereas 'A difference B' does not. Because this and related examples were all cases in which we moved from a proposition-expressing string of words to a non-proposition-

expressing string by substituting expressions of different syntactic categories for one another, it would not be surprising if such substitutions failed precisely because the syntax of the sentence makes some contribution to the proposition it expresses. This suggests that the wanted relation, which holds between constituents of the proposition, should have something to do with the syntactic structure of sentences which express the proposition.

5 KING'S THEORY OF PROPOSITIONS

A version of this strategy has been defended by Jeff King, in his important recent book *The Nature and Structure of Content*. On King's view, the relation which binds the constituents of the proposition is determined in part by the syntactic relation which holds between the expressions of a sentence which expresses the proposition. Consider a simple sentence, 'Amelia talks.'¹⁰ In giving the semantics of this sentence, we take as input three facts about the sentence: that it contains the name 'Amelia', that it contains the predicate 'talks', and that the sentence is formed by concatenating the latter with the former. King's view is that the relation which obtains here between the name and the predicate is, along with the object Amelia and the property of talking, a constituent of the fact which is the proposition expressed by the sentence. We can, to a first approximation, describe the proposition expressed by this sentence as follows, letting ' R ' be a name for the syntactic relation which holds between the name and predicate in this sentence: it is the fact of there being words x and y of some language such that x has Amelia as its content, y has the property of talking as its content, and $R(x, y)$.¹¹ King's view is thus Wittgensteinian in two ways: in its view of propositions as a kind of fact, and in its view that these facts are partly about the relations between representations and items in the world.¹²

This gloss on King's theory of propositions is only a first approximation because it leaves out the semantic contribution of the syntactic relation R . King brings out this point nicely via the example of a possible language, Nenglish, which is like English but for the fact that concatenation of a name and a predicate expresses a proposition which is true iff the referent of the name does *not* instantiate the property expressed by the predicate.¹³ The problem is that the account of propositions sketched above would seem to assign the same proposition to the string 'Amelia talks' in Nenglish as in English, despite this divergence in truth conditions. This seems clearly incorrect; so our theory of propositions will have to take account of the divergence in the semantic significance of concatenation of a name and simple predicate between the two languages.

As King suggests, we can think of the semantic significance of R in English as the following *instantiation function* from objects, properties, and worlds to truth values: the function which, given as argument an object o and property F , determines the truth value true at w iff o instantiates F at w . We can then describe the proposition expressed by 'Amelia talks' as follows: it is the fact of there being words x and y of some language such that x has Amelia as its content, y has the property of talking as its content, $R(x, y)$, and R encodes the instantiation function.¹⁴

King's view has some clear virtues. It assimilates propositions to facts, and so shares the virtues, discussed above, of all versions of this sort of view. It also, as King says, makes it plausible that propositions exist — after all, no one (at least, no

one who believes in facts) doubts that it is a fact that there are words x and y of some language such that x has Amelia as its content, y has the property of talking as its content, $R(x, y)$, and R encodes the instantiation function. And, as King says, we can see on this view why propositions are the sorts of things that can be true or false: the instantiation function has a kind of built-in connection to truth at a world.¹⁵

But the view also has some vices, the most serious of which result from the meta-linguistic nature of the facts with which King identifies propositions. The immediate objection to the view is that it makes propositions metaphysically dependent on the existence of a sentence which expresses them, so that, for example, no propositions existed, and hence were true, before there were humans. King, rightly, emphasizes in reply that his view entails neither that no propositions are *now* true of those times, nor that there were no facts at those times. But even if we set aside the extensional worry — Are there times at which propositions exist but languages do not? — one might still be worried about the idea that propositions depend for their existence on languages which express them. Consider, for example, cases of term introduction. Isn't it possible that you have a thought at a time, and at a later time introduce some new expression into the language to express that thought? If you think that thoughts have propositions as their objects, and that having a thought with some proposition p as content does not entail having a sentence in an inner language which has p as its content, this sort of case looks puzzling on King's view.

A more fundamental problem, I think, comes from consideration of the roles that propositions can play that are furthest removed from language use. Consider, for example, perceptual representation. If, as many think, it makes sense to think of perceptual experiences having propositional content, is it plausible to think that those contents are language-involving? The view is, on the face of it, unnatural.¹⁶

These problems may not be disqualifying. But I think that, all things being equal, it would be better to have a theory of propositions which avoided them. One idea about how to construct such a theory begins by noting that the explanatory power of King's view comes, in large part, from his assimilation of propositions to facts and his use of syntactic relations as the relations which genuinely hold between the constituents of the proposition. One wonders whether it would be possible to keep these aspects of the view without making propositions language-dependent. And, in fact, there's something odd about the role played by syntactic relations in King's theory which suggests that this should be possible.

As King points out (recall the example of English and Nenglish), we can, as in the case of linguistic expressions, distinguish between syntactic relations and their semantic contribution in a given language. This suggests that, just as we can have a pair of sentences

Montreal is pretty.

Montreal est jolie.

which contain different linguistic expressions but nonetheless express the same proposition, it should be possible to have a pair of sentences which differ with respect to the syntactic relations they involve, but nonetheless express just the same proposition. This should be possible for just the same reason that it is possible that sentences like the pair above can express the same proposition: just as two different linguistic

expressions can have the same semantic content, so, it seems, two distinct syntactic relations can make the same semantic contribution.¹⁷

For example, consider a language, Reverse-English, which is like English but for the fact that the order of singular terms in simple relational sentences is reversed, so that the sentence

John loves Jane.

is true in English if and only if

Jane loves John.

is true in Reverse-English. Intuitively, both sentences express the proposition that John loves Jane: they express the same proposition as surely as do ‘Montreal is pretty’ and ‘Montreal est jolie.’

But, on King’s theory of propositions, this is impossible. Although particular subsentential expressions are replaced in the fact which is the proposition expressed by a sentence by existential quantification over subsentential expressions, *both* the syntactic relation and its semantic contribution are constituents of the fact. The foregoing example brings out the oddness of this aspect of King’s view. Why not think, instead, that the syntax of a sentence, like the words of the sentence, contribute only something other than themselves to the proposition expressed by the sentence?

King could respond to this problem by treating syntactic relations in the same way he treats subsentential expressions, and replacing each occurrence of a syntactic relation in a proposition with existential quantification over syntactic relations. On such a view, the proposition expressed by ‘Amelia talks’ would be, roughly, the fact that there are expressions x and y such that x has Amelia as its content, y has the property of talking as its content, and there is some syntactic relation of some language such that x and y stand in that relation, and the relation encodes the instantiation function.

In my view, this move decreases the plausibility of the theory. There is something attractive about the idea that propositions are bound together by the very relation which binds together the expressions in the sentences that express them; but if King’s view is modified in the way suggested, that aspect of his view is lost. It makes King’s candidates for propositions seem less like what is expressed by sentences than like facts about those sentences expressing what they do.

Further, it makes it clear that it is the semantic contributions of subsentential expressions and the syntactic relations in which they stand, rather than the expressions and syntactic relations themselves, which are doing all the work. Since the inclusion of existential quantification over these expressions and relations as constituents of the relevant facts is what leads to the problems with King’s view discussed above, why not identify propositions with facts whose only constituents are the semantic contributions of subsentential expressions and the syntactic relations in which they stand?

On this sort of view, the semantic contribution of the syntactic form of a sentence would play the role of the unifying relation which genuinely holds between the constituents of the proposition. But this raises an immediate question: how, exactly, should we think about the semantic contributions of syntactic relations, on this sort

of view? Or, what comes to the same thing, exactly which fact, on this sort of view, would be the proposition expressed by ‘Amelia talks’?

Here, it seems, we run into a genuine difficulty. Whereas King is able to explain quite clearly which relation holds between the constituents of the facts with which he identifies propositions, it is very hard to describe a relation which is contributed by the syntax of a sentence, and genuinely holds between the constituents of the proposition. Consider again the proposition that Amelia talks. One is tempted to express the relation which is supposed to hold between Amelia and the property of talking with an open sentence like

There is a proposition which represents x as instantiating y .

but this is clearly incoherent; we’re supposed to be identifying the proposition expressed by ‘Amelia talks’ with a fact; this fact can’t be one which predicates a property of that very proposition. Maybe instead we could try

x is represented as instantiating y .

or

y is predicated of x .

but on the only obvious interpretations of these sentences, they make the existence of the fact dependent on someone’s having predicated the property of talking of Amelia, which is the kind of thing we were trying to avoid. And of course we can’t think of the relevant relation contributed by syntax as

x instantiates y .

without repeating Russell’s mistake of identifying propositions with facts whose existence entails their truth.

So, on the one hand, it is very plausible that syntactic relations make semantic contributions, and it would be extremely convenient if we could think of those semantic contributions as relations which held between the constituents of the proposition expressed by the relevant sentence; but, on the other hand, our inability to express these relations gives rise to the worry that this is just wishful thinking. In a way, this line of thought seems to lead us back to a view like King’s. After all, what sort of fact involving Amelia and the property of talking can be guaranteed to exist whether or not Amelia talks other than the fact that (in effect) some language represents it as being the case that Amelia talks?

The problem here seems to result from the assimilation of propositions to facts. The problem, as Russell himself came to think, seems to be that propositions can exist whether true or false, whereas acts can only exist ‘in one way.’ The result is that we have to identify propositions with facts which (1) exist whenever the relevant propositions should exist, and hence are the case whether or not those propositions are true, and yet (2) are such as to make possible an explanation for why the relevant proposition is true in some conditions but not in others. Given these constraints, the catalogue of failed alternatives canvassed above makes it hard to see how they could be facts very different from the ones King identifies. I think that this line of thought makes it very plausible that, if propositions are a kind of fact, they must be facts which are at least closely related to King’s candidates for the role.¹⁸

6 PROPOSITIONS AS PROPERTIES

However, this line of thought might also suggest that the assimilation of propositions to facts is a mistake, and that, if we are to explain propositions in terms of some other sort of entity, we ought to assimilate them to some kind of thing which, unlike a fact, can't just exist 'in one way.' Here properties naturally suggest themselves; if properties can exist uninstantiated, then properties, unlike facts, have two modes of existence to correspond to the distinction between true and false propositions. I suggest that, by thinking of propositions as properties rather than facts, we can keep the virtues of King's view identified above — its use of syntactic relations to unify the proposition, and its assimilation of propositions to another metaphysical category in which we have independent reason to believe — without any of its objectionable features.

The suggestion that propositions are properties is not original. The view was defended by Roderick Chisholm in *The First Person*, who expressed the theory like this:

“Believing must be construed as a relation between a believer and *some* other thing ... What kind of thing, then? ... The simplest conception, I suggest, is one which construes believing as a relation between a believer and a property — a property which he may be said to attribute to himself.”¹⁹

This ties the view that propositions are properties to a particular view about what the relevant properties are properties of. And it is understandable why the view was introduced in this way, since its principal initial motivation was the explanation of the distinction between first-personal beliefs and third-personal beliefs about oneself — or, as Chisholm put it, between the emphatic and non-emphatic reflexive.

But we can detach the view that propositions are properties from the view that they are always properties ascribed to oneself; and, as Daniel Nolan has argued, there's good reason why we should. Nolan points out that while in many cases we can think of a propositional attitude with the content p as a belief that I am such that p is the case, but that, in other cases, understanding the content of the belief requires that we consider worlds where p is the case, but in which *I* am not such that p is the case, because I do not exist.²⁰ The most striking case is perhaps the example of the desire that I not exist. This is not the desire that I have the property of nonexistence, and still less that I be such that I do not exist; the desire is that I not exist, and hence that I not be any way — not have *any* property — at all. Similar worries arise even in cases where my belief is not, intuitively, a 'first-personal' belief; it seems as though I can desire that such-and-such be the case without desiring that I be around when it does. And, on a more intuitive level, there is something unnatural about the view that all of my mental states are attributions of properties to myself; it should be possible for my thinking to be less self-involving than that.

There is no reason why the view that propositions are properties should be tied to the view that all thought is self-ascription. Consider again the example of 'Amelia talks.' If we think of the assertion of this sentence as the ascription of a property, one natural view is that I am ascribing to the world the property of being such that Amelia talks. On this kind of view, propositions are complex properties, rather than

facts. Then, intuitively, what is contributed by the syntax of a simple predication is something like the three-place relation expressed by ‘___ is such that ___ instantiates ___ ’ which holds between a world, an object, and a property. In the case of the sentence ‘Amelia talks’, the contents of the name and predicate fill in the second two slots to deliver the monadic property of worlds expressed by ‘___ is such that Amelia instantiates the property of talking.’²¹

Above I criticized Chisholm’s view on the basis of the oddness of saying that every belief is something that one believes about *oneself*; but isn’t it equally odd to say that every belief is something that one believes of *the world*? I don’t think so; it is natural, for example, to say that believing is *taking the world to be a certain way*. And this gloss certainly sounds like the view that belief is an ascription of a property to the world. So the view does have a certain intuitive plausibility.²²

To be sure, just as the view that propositions are facts requires metaphysical commitments about what facts there are, this view requires metaphysical commitments about properties. In particular, if the view is to be plausible, it seems clear that we must think that there are uninstantiated properties, and indeed properties which could not be instantiated. Otherwise, there would be no account of the propositions expressed by necessarily false sentences.²³

How is this account supposed to solve Russell’s original problem? What, for example, is the explanation of the fact that

A differs from *B*

expresses a proposition and has a truth-value, whereas

A difference *B*

does not? The explanation, like King’s, is given in terms of the syntax of English. ‘differs from’ is a two place predicate, ‘difference’ is a singular term; let ‘*A*’ and ‘*B*’ be stand-ins for names. Then we can give a (no doubt over-simple) explanation of the fact that the first expresses a proposition as follows: in English, concatenating a name with a two-place predicate and another name has the semantic significance that it encodes the four-place relation expressed by ‘*w* is such that *x* stands in relation *R* to *y*’. So, once we fill in the semantic contents of the relevant terms, we get the property of worlds which is the property of being such that *A* stands in the difference relation to *B*. However, in English concatenating a name with an abstract singular term and another name encodes nothing; it has no semantic significance. So we are left with, effectively, a list of items, which is not the sort of thing which could be instantiated, and hence is not the sort of thing which could be true of anything.

...

With this view in hand, we can now turn to the explanatory power of the property theory. In the next two sections, I’ll argue that the theory has two explanatory benefits: its ability to make intelligible the idea that propositions represent the world as being a certain way, and hence have truth conditions;²⁴ and its ability to explain the difference between certain sorts of beliefs expressible using indexicals and the

beliefs attributed by non-indexical sentences which are about just the same items in the world. In the final two sections of the paper, I will turn to consideration of what I think is the most important challenge to the property view: the problem of integrating the view into a satisfactory semantics for propositional attitude ascriptions.

7 PROPOSITIONS, REPRESENTATION, AND TRUTH

The property theory brings with it a natural account of the relationship between propositions and their truth-conditions: truth is instantiation; a proposition is true at a world iff the world instantiates that property.²⁵ One might object that propositions are, unlike properties, true or false simpliciter, and not just true *of* things. But propositions are also true at, or with respect to, a possible world (or other circumstance of evaluation); on the present account, that is just equivalent to the relevant properties being true of, i.e. instantiated by, possible worlds. The notion of ‘truth simpliciter’ is just truth at the actual world, or the world of the context. Similarly, a property of worlds is ‘true simpliciter’ on the present account when it is true of the actual world, or the world of the context.²⁶

And if truth and falsity can be reduced to, respectively, instantiation and non-instantiation, this gives natural sense to the idea that propositions represent the world as being a certain way: the way that a proposition represents the world is being is just the way that world would have to be for the relevant property to be instantiated.

Of course, even after being told that for a proposition to be true at a world is for the world to instantiate the relevant property, one might still wonder *what it is* for a world to instantiate a property like the property of being such that Amelia talks. This is a fair enough question, but doesn’t seem to raise any special problems for the present view, for here we can give any answer which would have been available as an answer to the question, ‘What is it for the proposition that Amelia talks to be true with respect to a world?’ Some might answer this latter question in terms of the existence of the fact that Amelia talks in some worlds; but we can just as easily use the existence of facts of this sort at a world w to explain why w instantiates the property of being such that Amelia talks as to explain why the proposition that Amelia talks is true at w . Others might resist the demand to supply a truthmaker for every truth, and say that what it is for the proposition that Amelia talks to be true at a world is just for the proposition to have the property of being true in that world, full stop; just so, we might want to say that what it is for a world to instantiate the property of being such that Amelia talks is just for the world to instantiate that property, full stop.

Given this view of truth as instantiation, thinking of propositions as properties of worlds does not seem to require any serious revision in the way that we think about entailment relations between propositions, or semantics more generally. Propositions are necessary iff they are true with respect to every possible world; just so, on the present account, the propositions are necessary iff the properties which they are instantiated by every possible world. Entailment relations between propositions would be recast as relations between worlds: one property F would entail another property G iff any world which instantiates F also instantiates G . And debates over the contents of various sorts of sub-sentential expressions seem as though they’d be

more or less unaffected by the answer to the question of whether we should think of propositions as properties, facts, or as a *sui generis* sort of abstract object.

8 INDEXICALITY

This view of propositions might also be developed in such a way as to capture some of the explanatory advantages of Chisholm's view of propositions as properties that one ascribes to oneself.

Though in the standard case beliefs are attributions of monadic properties of worlds, there's no reason why they *always* have to be such. There seems nothing to block the idea that propositional attitudes could sometimes be a matter of a subject ascribing a relation to a pair of a world and an individual — that is, there seems nothing to block the idea that propositions could sometimes work in something like the way that Chisholm and Lewis thought that they always work. On one natural way of developing this view, the proposition expressed by, for example,

Jeff Speaks's pants are on fire.

might be thought of as the property of worlds expressed by the open sentence

w is such that o 's pants are on fire

relative to an assignment of me to ' o ', while the proposition expressed by

My pants are on fire.

might be thought of as the relation between worlds and individuals expressed by the open sentence

w is such that x 's pants are on fire.

The intuitive difference in content between an assertion of these two sentences might be explained by the fact that an utterance of the former is an ascription to the world of the property of being such that a certain object's pants are on fire, whereas an utterance of the latter is an ascription of a certain relation to oneself and the world. This gives the present view a way to give a natural treatment of the distinction between first-personal beliefs and third-personal beliefs about oneself: the former are self-ascriptions of a relation to the world, and the latter are ascriptions of properties to the world.

On the face of it, there is no reason why the same sort of treatment couldn't be extended to propositions expressible using the indexical 'now' and beliefs expressible using a name for the present time; perhaps the former are properties ascribed to world/time pairs, whereas the latter are properties, which involving a specific time, ascribed to the world. This promises to explain the apparent difference between the belief that it is now raining, and the belief that it is raining at such-and-such a time, where such-and-such a time is now; analogous remarks seem to apply to indexical beliefs about places. A virtue of this sort of account, as others have noted, is that it explains the apparent differences between first- and third-personal beliefs without positing an inexplicable difference in mode of presentation of the relevant

time (or place, or subject) and without explaining apparent differences in content via differences in belief state.²⁷

If we conjoin the view that propositions are properties with the sort of view about indexicality sketched above, the standard Kaplan semantics for indexicals would be largely unaffected. Suppose that Bob asserts

I am morose.

On the present view (setting aside, as above, questions about whether propositions are time-indexed), he is asserting of the world and agent of the context the relation expressed by ' w is such that x is morose'; this is a self-ascription as well as a world-ascription of the relevant relation. In ascribing this relation to the actual world and himself, he also ascribes to the world the monadic property ' w is such that Bob is morose'. What makes it the case that this, rather than some other one, is the monadic property that he ascribes to the world? Presumably the character of 'I', which is a function from contexts to the object which is the speaker of that context.

So, on this way of developing the view, self-ascription always also involves a world-ascription of a monadic property, though the converse won't hold, even when the monadic property in question has the ascriber as a constituent. To extend this from a bare sketch to a theory of indexical beliefs, we'd have to say much more about how to think about the truth conditions for propositional attitude ascriptions, and in particular about whether sentences like 'Bob believes that he himself is morose' can be false while 'Bob believes that Bob is morose' are true. In general, as we'll see below, the problem of giving an adequate semantics for attitude ascriptions is one of the most difficult problems for the sort of view I have been developing.

9 A PARTIAL SEMANTICS FOR ATTITUDE ASCRIPTIONS

On the present view, it would seem that having a belief (or other propositional attitude) is not just a matter of standing in a binary relation to a thing, the proposition which is the content of that belief. Rather, it is a matter of standing in a ternary relation to the world and a property — it is (in the case of belief) taking the world to have that property. This would lead us to expect that ordinary belief ascriptions of the form

A believes that S .

should not express binary relations between subjects and propositions, but rather ternary relations between a subject, the world, and a property. But this view, as we'll see, faces serious difficulties.

First, this sort of analysis runs counter to the surface form of attitude ascriptions, which seem to predicate binary relations of a subject and a proposition. But, it might be replied, sometimes sentences which seem to predicate binary relations of a pair of objects really attribute ternary relations to a trio of things; for example, sentences of the form

A is to the left of B

seem to attribute binary relations, but are best understood as expressing a proposition involving the ternary relation corresponding to the open sentence

x is to the left of y relative to z

For another example, consider the plausible view that all propositions have their truth-values eternally.²⁸ On one natural interpretation of this view, propositions will in the standard case contain a reference to the time with respect to which the property or relation in question is being predicated of the relevant object or objects; but then every sentence which appears to be a predication of a binary relation of pair of objects but contains no explicit mention of a time will in fact be a predication of a ternary relation of the pair of objects and the relevant time. So the view that what seem at the level of surface grammar to be binary predicates can turn out on analysis to express ternary relations is certainly well-precedented.

But even if this makes room for the view that attitude verbs express ternary relations, it does not show exactly how we should think of the logical form of attitude ascriptions. A natural first thought is that a belief ascription of the form

A believes that S

expresses a proposition like that which would be expressed by a sentence of the form

A believes of o that it is F .

where ' F ' is the property expressed by ' S ' in the context. However, in order to defend a view like this we need to answer a difficult question: what sort of thing is the value of ' o '?

Given the foregoing, a natural response to this question would be: the world of the context, i.e., the actual world. (In what follows, I will use ' α ' as a name for the actual world.) But this view is open to a decisive objection which Scott Soames has pressed against the view that names have the contents of descriptions rigidified using the actuality operator. Against the view that sentences of the form

n is F

express propositions of the form

[the x : x is the actual G] Fx

i.e.,

[the x : x is the G in α] Fx

Soames pointed out that this interpretation of names will entail that any attitude ascription

A V 's that n is F

will be false with respect to any world w in which the subject of the ascription has no thoughts about α . But in the standard case, subjects will have thoughts about very few possible worlds distinct from their own; hence this theory of names makes wildly incorrect predictions about the modal profiles of the propositions expressed by attitude ascriptions.²⁹

But any interpretation of attitude ascriptions as making claims about ways a subject believes the actual world to be would be open to the same objection: such a view would make radically false predictions about the modal profiles of the propositions expressed by those attitude ascriptions, since it would make them false with respect to any world such that the subject of the predication has, in that world, no views at all about the properties of our world. And, more fundamentally, it would just be focusing on the wrong thing: the proposition that I believe that the world is round is true with respect to w iff in w , I believe *of* w that it is such that the world is round, not if in w I believe this of α .

For this reason, it is best not to think of attitude ascriptions as expressing propositions which would be expressed by sentences of the form

A believes of o that it is F .

relative to an assignment of α to the free variable ‘ o .’ But there simply is no other candidate to be the value of ‘ o ’; hence we should not take the propositions expressed by attitude ascriptions to be of the above form.

A natural alternative is to take the propositions expressed by attitude ascriptions to be the propositions which would be expressed by sentences of the form

[the x : x is the world] A believes of x that it is F .

This analysis still makes belief ascriptions claims about how a subject takes the world to be; but it makes the relevant world the world of the circumstance of evaluation rather than the world of the context. On this sort of view, an ascription of a belief to a subject is true with respect to a world w iff the subject believes *of* w — not of α , the actual world — that it instantiates the relevant property. (The defender of the view that names are rigidified descriptions can’t make a parallel reply to Soames’ argument, since the whole point of rigidification is to secure the result that names are rigid designators — and this result would be lost if the referent of a name with respect to w depended on the properties of things in w , rather than α .)³⁰

This sort of view also stays a bit closer to the standard semantics for belief ascriptions, in that it does not take them to predicate a ternary relation of a subject, a world, and a proposition, but rather a binary relation between a subject and a proposition — albeit a binary relation defined by existential generalization on a ternary relation.³¹ This sort of analysis of attitude ascriptions also stays fairly close to a natural sort of paraphrase of belief (and other attitude) ascriptions — it takes the proposition expressed by an attitude ascription like

Bob believes that Indiana is cold.

to be the proposition expressed by

Bob believes the world to be such that Indiana is cold.

which fits nicely with the intuitive idea that in forming a belief we are taking the world to be a certain way. The point generalizes to attitudes other than beliefs; in hoping that such-and-such, we are hoping that the world will be a certain way; in supposing that such-and-such, we are supposing that the world is a certain way; and so on.

One advantage of this view of the semantics of attitude ascriptions is that it, unlike other alternatives to the admittedly natural view that such ascriptions predicate binary relations of subjects and *sui generis* propositions, it can accommodate at least some of the linguistic data which seem to support the standard view. Consider, for example, the fact that an attitude ascription of the form

A believes that S

entails the existentially quantified sentence

There is something that A believes.

This is accommodated by the standard semantics, but it is also accommodated by the sort of view I have been developing. After all, just as

A is to the left of B

despite really predicating a ternary relation of A , B , and some third thing, entails

There is something that A is to the left of.

so the attitude ascription might entail the corresponding existentially quantified claim despite predicating a ternary relation of A , the world, and the property which is the content of ‘ S ’ in the context. On the present view, that existentially quantified claim would involve quantification over properties, and would have the same content as something like the following:

$\exists F$ [the x : x is the world] A believes of x that it is F .³²

10 A PUZZLE ABOUT ATTITUDE ASCRIPTIONS

I’ve expressed the present view as the claim that propositions are properties; in particular, the proposition that Amelia talks is the property of being such that Amelia talks. But this immediately gives rise to a difficult puzzle about attitude ascriptions, namely that it seems to entail the validity of the following inference:

Bob believes that Amelia talks.
Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks.

But the conclusion hardly seems coherent, let alone entailed by the premise.

One might think that this is a place in which this view can come to its own rescue. After all, given that difference is the relation denoted by ‘differs from’, one might have thought that the following should be valid:

A differs from B .
A difference B .

But this is not valid, since the conclusion fails to express a proposition — and this is a fact which the view that propositions are properties promises to explain. Might we offer a similar explanation of the fact that ‘Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks’ fails to express a proposition?

Perhaps, but it is not quite this easy. We can’t simply say that

Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks.

fails to express a proposition because sentences of the form

A believes the *F*.

are ungrammatical since, in general, they aren't — we might truly say

Bob believes the proposition expressed by 'Amelia talks.'

This suggests that the conclusion of the problematic argument above is not ungrammatical, but simply false.

This places a constraint on the sort of semantics for attitude ascriptions which the defender of the present view — who will have a hard time denying that 'that Amelia talks' and 'the property of being such that Amelia talks' — refer to the same thing — can accept. In particular, it looks like the proponent of the view of propositions that I have been sketching will have to deny the following principle:

If an attitude ascription 'A *V*'s *x*' is true — where *A* is the name of the subject of the ascription, *V* is the attitude verb, and *x* is some term for a proposition — then any other ascription which differs from this only by the replacement of *x* with another term for the same proposition must also be true.

It can't be denied that this principle has a great deal of initial plausibility. However, there is some independent reason to deny it. (For a much more in-depth discussion of these issues, see King (2007), chapter 5.) Consider, for example, the pair of sentences

Joe hopes that the Reds will win the World Series this year.

Joe hopes the proposition that the Reds will win the World Series this year.

Presuming that that-clauses designate propositions, this is a pair of sentences of the sort mentioned in the principle above; but the first of these is true, and the second is ungrammatical. It might be argued that this is not analogous to the example involving 'the property of being such that Amelia talks', since that example, as discussed above, is a pair of *grammatical* sentences which nonetheless differ in truth-value. But there are also examples of this sort. Consider

Joe fears that the Mets will win the World Series this year.

Joe fears the proposition that the Mets will win the World Series this year.

These are both grammatical, but the first is true, and the second is false — Joe may be afraid of many things, but propositions are not among them.

The proponent of the view of propositions as properties might seize on examples like this, and say that whatever explains the fact that these sentences about Joe's fears differ in truth-value can also explain the fact that our initial pair of sentences,

Bob believes that Amelia talks.

Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks.

can differ in truth-value, despite the fact that ‘that Amelia talks’ and ‘the property of being such that Amelia talks’ both designate the same thing. To be sure, it is not obvious that this line of response is satisfactory, since it is not obvious that the explanation of the ‘fears’ substitution failures will carry over to the example we are interested in; but the two sorts of examples do seem similar, so it is perhaps not unreasonable to hold that the right treatment of the ‘fears’ examples will solve our own problem.³³

In general, what the argument of this section seems to show is that we cannot conjoin a simple reduction of propositions to properties with the view that sentences involving attitude verbs predicate binary relations of subjects and the referents of the that-clauses or singular terms which follow those verbs. Instead what we have is a reduction of attitudes to propositions to different sorts of attributions of properties to objects (which are, in the standard case, worlds). In this sense, the present account is a reduction of attitudes *de dicto* to attitudes *de re*: every belief is a belief *of* something that it has a certain property. For some purposes, we can replace talk about propositions with talk about the associated properties; but in contexts in which we are thinking of propositions as ‘whatever are the referents of that-clauses’, we have to be more careful.

11 BACK TO RUSSELL

Given that our discussion began with Russell’s way of raising the problem of the nature of the proposition, it is perhaps not surprising that the view we’ve ended up with is a close relative of the view to which this problem led Russell: his multiple relation theory of judgement.³⁴ On Russell’s theory, judging and believing are not relations between thinkers and propositions, but rather multigrade relations between the thinker and the items that we would regard as the constituents of the relevant proposition. On both Russell’s view and the property view, propositional attitudes are never just a relation to a single entity, the proposition, but always predicate a property of a thing (or a relation of several things).

But the present view seems superior to Russell’s. For one thing, the present view has no trouble making sense of apparent quantification over propositions, as in ‘There’s at least one proposition that Hilary and Obama both believe’; that sentence says that there’s at least one property that Hilary and Obama both believe the world to have. After all, unlike Russell’s multiple relation theory, the present view is not a form of eliminativism about propositions, but is rather a claim about what sorts of things propositions are. And the present view takes propositional attitude ascriptions more or less at face value, as asserting a relation between the subject of the ascription and the content of the sentence in the complement clause; it’s just that the present view identifies that content as a kind of complex property, rather than as either a fact or a *sui generis* sort of abstract object.³⁵

The present identification of propositions with properties might also share an intuitive sort of motivation with Russell’s multiple relation theory. In ‘On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood,’ Russell raised an important worry about the existence of

false propositions. Russell asked us to consider some false sentence, like ‘Gore won in 2000’ and asked whether, given that there is no such thing as Gore’s having won in 2000, there could be such a thing as *that Gore won in 2000*.³⁶ Russell’s idea seems to have been that when we ascribe a property to an object, there is the object, the property ascribed, the act of property ascription, and, if the object instantiates the property, the fact of the thing’s having the property; *but there is no room for some other thing, the proposition that the object has that property*. But even from this skeptical perspective, we should have no problem believing that, while the world is not such that Gore won in 2000, it could have been such that Gore won in 2000. And, if we believe this, we should have no problem believing in the existence of the property of being such that Gore won in 2000. So, if this is what propositions are, we should have no problem believing in propositions.³⁷

NOTES

¹There are some complications here. For one, the above entails that any propositions too complex to be entertained in thought will, vacuously, have every object and property as a constituent. One way around this is to require that (in the case of the first condition) one entertain a thought about that pen cap *by or in* entertaining a thought with content *p*. Thanks to Kenny Boyce and Alex Skiles for helpful discussion of this point.

²We can generate the same effect any time we substitute terms with the same content, but which belong to different grammatical categories. Accordingly, one can resolve the problem exemplified by ‘differs from’ and ‘difference’ by, following Frege, denying that it is possible for terms of different grammatical categories ever to share a content. (See his discussion of the concept *horse* in Frege (1892).)

While initially plausible, this position, as Russell pointed out, seems to lead to “inextricable difficulties” (Russell (1903), §49). The point is easiest to make if we assume a Millian view of some class of singular terms, like names. For suppose that predicates have contents, relative to contexts. Surely it should be possible to talk about those contents; and if it is possible to talk about them, it should be possible to introduce a name for one. But then if names are Millian, the name so introduced will have the same content as the predicate in question, and we will be able to generate a substitution of the sort exemplified by ‘differs from’ and ‘difference.’

The same point can be made, albeit less decisively, without assuming a Millian view of names. As Russell suggests, someone who denies that expressions of different syntactic categories can ever share a content will still be tempted to make general claims about the meanings of predicates, such as

Every meaningful predicate has a content, and that content is not the content of any proper name.

which seems to have the following form:

$\forall x (x \text{ is a meaningful predicate} \rightarrow \exists y (y \text{ is the content of } x \ \& \ \forall z (z \text{ is a name} \rightarrow \neg (y \text{ is the content of } z)))$

But, given that there are some meaningful predicates, for the above to be true, the open sentence

x is a meaningful predicate & y is the content of x

must be true relative to some assignment of values to x and y . So the content of some predicate must be such that it can be the value of a variable occurring in subject position. But if this is true, it seems that, if open sentences express propositions relative to an assignment of values to free variables, there must be a proposition which is such that the content of some predicate occurs in subject position. But then why couldn't there be some sentence which expresses that proposition, which would then have to contain some singular term whose content is the content of the predicate in question?

In any case, even if a Fregean reply to Russell's problem about verbs and verbal nouns can be maintained, the moral of Russell's problem can also be established, as discussed below, by the example of sentences involving non-symmetric relational predicates.

³See Davidson (2005) for a dissenting view.

⁴Thanks to Alex Skiles for helpful discussion here.

⁵Unless, of course, the proponent of that sort of view explains one of these categories in terms of propositions, as with views that take facts to be true propositions.

⁶This sort of problem is pressed in King (2007), 6.

⁷An interesting alternative to the view that propositions are primitive abstract objects is to define propositions in terms of types of primitive mental acts. A view of this sort is developed in Soames (2010). Discussion of Soames' view is beyond the scope of this paper, though I think that the view to be defended below shares many of its advantages.

⁸As is well known, this is the problem which eventually led Russell to abandon belief in propositions. See the discussion of 'false objectives' in Russell (1910).

⁹Russell does say that he means "assertion in a logical as opposed to a psychological sense," which may indicate awareness of the present problem. But then of course one wants to know what assertion, in the logical sense, is.

¹⁰My exposition here follows King's discussion of 'Rebecca swims.'

¹¹Here I'm glossing over King's distinction (p. 62) between the constituents of a proposition and the components of the fact which is that proposition. R is, in King's terms, a component of the fact but not a constituent of the proposition. Though the distinction is genuine, I don't think anything is lost setting it aside in what follows.

¹²As Wittgenstein put it: “a proposition is a propositional sign in its projective relation to the world” (*Tractatus* §3.12).

¹³King (2007), 35-8.

¹⁴See, e.g., King (2007), 37.

¹⁵Though it is important not to overstate this last virtue. Strictly, the instantiation function supplies a built-in connection between *sentences* and their truth conditions; if the fact as well is supposed to have truth conditions, these would presumably be inherited from the truth conditions of the sentences in question. But one might reasonably wonder why facts should automatically inherit truth conditions from the sentences which they are about. For criticisms of King’s view along these lines, along with other criticisms, see Soames (forthcoming). For King’s discussion of this sort of objection, see King (2009).

¹⁶And if perceptual experience is genuinely propositional, and it is, as it seems, possible to perceptually represent the world as being a way which no existing sentence says that it is, then perceptual representation also seems to be a source of counterexamples to King’s view. The proponent of King’s view could reply that the contents of perceptual experiences of this sort are mere ‘proto-propositions’ or that perceptual experience itself requires an inner language which is such that, if an agent’s perceptual experience of the world represents it as being the case that *p*, there is some sentence of that inner language which has the content that *p*.

¹⁷King might, of course, resist these intuitions about sameness of content. This is related to the objection that his account individuates contents too finely; see King (2007), 95 ff.

¹⁸With the minor qualification that King should existentially generalize over the syntactic properties as well as the words of a sentence, as discussed above.

¹⁹Chisholm (1981), 27. A similar theory is defended in Lewis (1979). For another view which takes propositions to be at least very closely related to properties and relations, see van Inwagen (2006).

²⁰Nolan (2006)

²¹One might worry that this is not really a property of worlds alone; if Amelia talks, then isn’t, for example, my desk also such that Amelia instantiates the property of talking? I think that it is; but I think that the property attributed ascribed to my desk in this sentence is different than the property ascribed to the world by one who endorses the sentence ‘Amelia talks,’ despite the fact that both are expressible by the form of words ‘is such that Amelia talks.’

Consider the following analogous case: on a rainy afternoon in New York I might attribute a property to the city by saying ‘New York is such that it is raining.’ It would also be true to say of the *time* that it ‘is such that it is raining’ — but the property thus ascribed to the time is not the same property as the one ascribed to the place, despite the fact that the form of words used to ascribe the property is the

same.

There is a certain property that worlds can have which we might express by saying that they are such that Amelia instantiates the property of talking but which we can also express a bit more descriptively with locutions like the following: ‘the property of being such that, according to w , Amelia instantiates the property of talking’; ‘the property of being such that, were w actual, Amelia would instantiate the property of talking’; etc. I take it that the sort of property singled out by phrases such as these is a property which worlds, but not things like my desk, could instantiate. Thanks to Matthew Lee for pressing this point.

²²One might worry that the move from properties of believers to properties of the world fails to avoid Nolan’s problem: just as one can coherently desire that one never have existed, can’t one desire that the world never have existed? I’m not so sure. It seems to me that, even in this case, one is desiring the world to be a certain way: one is desiring the world to be such that it contains no things; one is desiring that the universe be empty. So it seems easier to understand what one desires here to be that the world has a certain property than it is to understand what property the desire that one not have existed could predicate of oneself.

This is not to say that there are no problems about what sort of entity ‘the world’ could be. But this sort of talk of ‘the world’ is not unique to the present view; it is employed, for example, by the many philosophers who think of possible worlds as ‘ways *the world* might be.’

One might think that there is a special problem here involving philosophers who are skeptical that there is such a thing as ‘the world.’ Could they really be so confused as to deny the existence of a kind of thing despite the fact that they are constantly attributing properties to an instance of that kind? But many sorts of philosophical views have the consequence that certain sorts of philosopher are confused in this way. A believer in universals will have this attitude toward certain nominalists, and substance dualists will have this attitude toward certain materialists.

²³A view of properties which I think would suit my purposes is outlined in van Inwagen (2004).

²⁴The idea that this is something which a theory of propositions should explain is emphasized in Soames (2010, forthcoming)

²⁵There are complications here if one thinks that the property of being such that Socrates does not exist could not exist without Socrates — see Plantinga (1983). But one who thinks that the property of being such that Socrates does not exist could not exist without Socrates is likely to think the same of the proposition that Socrates does not exist; if so, Plantinga’s problem, while fundamental, is independent of the question of whether propositions are properties. I explore Plantinga’s problem in Speaks (ms.).

²⁶It might seem that the fact that propositions are truth-apt would give rise to a problem for the present view, which might be put as follows:

On this view, the proposition that Amelia talks is identical to the property of being such that Amelia talks. But the property of being such that Amelia talks is simply not the kind of thing that can be true or false, whereas a proposition clearly is. So, propositions must not be properties.

Any view which assimilates propositions to entities of another metaphysical category will run into some version of the this problem. King's theory, for example, faces much the same objection. ('Propositions are true or false but facts are not, so propositions can't be facts.') Though this objection is a fundamental one, I think that the proponent of the view that propositions are properties has a fairly natural reply: we already have the notion of a property being *true of* something, so it is not as though there is no precedent for properties being closely connected to truth and falsity.

One might further complain that this view of truth gets the order of explanation backwards: truth with respect to a world should be explained in terms of truth simpliciter (perhaps by saying that p is true with respect to w iff, were w actual, p would be true) rather than the other way around. However, I think that the property view has the resources to answer this worry if an account of what it is for w to instantiate a proposition can be given in terms of what would have to be the case, were w actual. I discuss some ways of doing this in *Speaks* (ms.).

²⁷Fregeans who take indexicals and names to differ in sense take the former course, while Perry (1979) takes the latter. This explanatory virtue of the identification of propositions with properties is not shared with views, like King's, which identify propositions with facts: on a Millian view, of course, it is hard to see how the fact corresponding to 'My pants are on fire' could be distinct from the fact corresponding to 'Jeff Speaks's pants are on fire.'

²⁸For a defense, see Richard (1981).

²⁹For this argument, along with a critical discussion of possible descriptivist replies, see Soames (2002), 43-9.

³⁰Of course, in talking about 'the propositions expressed by attitude ascriptions', I don't take attitude ascriptions to be exceptions to the claim that the semantic contents of 'proposition-expressing' strings of words are really properties. The content of an attitude ascription ' A V 's that S ' will, on the present view, be the following property of worlds: the property of being such that the world is such that A believes of it that it is F .

³¹In this respect, the view of belief is similar to that defended in Salmon (1986). Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

³²Here I'm assuming that quantification into predicate place is legitimate. If it is not, then presumably whatever is the correct treatment of natural language locutions that seem to involve such quantification can be adapted to the above case.

³³One plausible explanation of the examples involving 'fears', which is defended in King (2007) (153-163) is that some attitude verbs, including 'fears,' are ambiguous. This will only help with our 'believes' example if 'believes' is also ambiguous; but it

may not be implausible to say that it is. Consider, for example:

Joe believes that the Reds will win the World Series this year.
Joe believes Dusty.

If we take these sentences at face value, then it looks like ‘believes’ expresses different (though obviously related) relations in these two sentences. Perhaps the problem with our troublesome pair of ‘belief’ sentences is that

Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks.

forces the interpretation of ‘believes’ exemplified by ‘Joe believes Dusty.’

This is, obviously, a view on which ‘believes’ is ambiguous (though the two meanings are of course related). But it is nowhere near a systematic account of this ambiguity. A systematic account would have to explain why the first interpretation of ‘believes’ – on which it expresses a ternary relation — is triggered not just by belief ascriptions involving that-clauses, but also by sentences like the following:

Bob believes what Amelia said.
Bob believes the proposition expressed by what Amelia said.
Bob believes the first thing he hears every day.

and so on.

For a useful discussion of some alternatives to this view that ‘believes’ is ambiguous in the way I have suggested, see King (2007), p. 157, note 39.

³⁴See Russell (1910, 1912).

³⁵For an interesting defense of Russell’s view, with an attempt to reply to objections like these, see Moltmann (2003).

³⁶See Russell’s discussion of ‘that Charles I died in his bed’, in Russell (1910), p. 151.

³⁷Thanks to Jeff King for helpful discussion of his view, and to Marian David and the participants in my graduate seminars at Notre Dame in the spring of 2008 and fall of 2009 for discussion of issues surrounding the metaphysics of propositions. Special thanks to Matthew Lee and Lorraine Juliano-Keller for comments on previous drafts of this essay.

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