An Act-Based Theory of Assertibles and Instantiables

Ryan Simonelli

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0   Introduction

In recent years, there has been renewed attention to the metaphysics and epistemology of propositions. Several authors such as King (2009, 2014), Soames (2014, 2015), and Hanks (2011, 2015) have argued, on primarily semantic grounds, that propositions must be structured representational entities rather than sets of possible worlds, yet have also argued that traditional platonic conceptions of structured propositions of the sort associated with Frege and Russell face serious metaphysical and epistemological problems. Accordingly, they have attempted to articulate "naturalized" accounts of propositions, understanding such things as in some way dependent upon our cognitive or linguistic activities. All existing such accounts, however, appeal to platonic properties and relations as an essential theoretical ingredient. While King and Soames are unbothered by this appeal, Hanks (2015, 206-207; 2017) seriously worries that many of the same concerns about propositions, traditionally understood, can be raised with respect to properties as well, and Pautz (2016) has explicitly raised this problematic analogy for naturalized accounts of propositions. In this paper, I show how the act-based approach developed by Hanks can be radicalized such that it yields an account of properties and relations as well. The core idea is integrating an act-based metaphysics of the sort developed by Hanks with a normative functionalist semantics of the sort developed by Robert Brandom (1994).

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 1, I draw on Peter van Inwagen's (2006) unified characterization of properties, relations, and propositions as "assertibles" and contrast this with an alternative conception of such things as "instantiables." Beyond the intuitive conceptual distinction, the core concrete contrast I point out is one of fineness vs. coarseness of grain; there may be a number of assertibles corresponding to a single instantiable. This enables the specification of the core task of the paper: giving a unified act-based account of assertibles, instantiables, and their relation. The first step, which I prosecute in Section 2, is to show how Hanks's act-based account of propositions can be radicalized to provide a unified account of assertibles. On the account I provide, token acts of predication are understood as the types of acts that they are not in virtue of a representation relation they bear to a platonic entity but in virtue of how they relate, intrinsically as acts, to other such acts. In Section 3, I articulate a new account of opacity on the act-based theory according to which, when phrases expressing propositional or predicative acts are embedded in the belief or assertion contexts, the normative significance of those acts is to be understood as relativized to the scorekeeping perspective of the believer or asserter. Finally, in Section 4, I show how, from a normative functionalist account of predicative and propositional acts, one can arrive at an account of properties and states of affairs by transposing the norms governing those acts into alethic modal vocabulary, while acknowledging that the set of norms one actually binds oneself by in performing such an act outstrips the set of norms one takes oneself to be bound by. This accounts for the distinction between assertibles and instantiables and enables one to think of oneself as predicating objective properties of objects in performing predicative acts.

1 Assertibles and Instantiables

I start with an account of properties, relations, and propositions put forward by Peter van Inwagen (2006), according to which all such things are broadly classified as "assertibles."[1] van Inwagen's basic thought is that, whereas propositions are things that are *asserted* (full stop, as it were), properties and relations are things that are asserted *of* things. For instance, I might assert that the Sun is round. This is, surely, to assert something, namely, that the Sun is round. The phrase "that the Sun is round" picks out what I assert: the proposition that the Sun is round. In asserting that the Sun is round, however, I assert *of* the Sun *that it's round.* Here, "that it's round" picks out what I assert of the Sun, and what I assert of the Sun might be something that you assert of Neptune. That is, just as I assert of the Sun that it's round, you might assert of Neptune that it's round. The phrase "that it's round," then, might be understood as picking out an "unsaturated assertible," something that can be asserted *of* things. More specifically, *that it's round* is a 1-place assertible: something that's asserted of just one thing. There are 2-place assertibles, which are asserted of two things, for instance, *that the first is bigger than the second* which I might assert of the Sun and Neptune, 3-place assertibles, and so on. So, whereas propositions are 0-place asertibles, properties and n-place relations are 1-place and n-place assertibles.

To call properties, relations, and propositions "assertibles" is simply to identify them as the *contents* of assertion. That is, they are *what one asserts*, either of something or full-stop, when one makes an assertion. Though they are characterized, in the first instance, as the contents of *assertion*, it's crucial, of course, that what one asserts (of something or

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[1] The guiding idea behind this account can be traced to Frege. The treatment of propositions as 0-place relations can be found in Quine (1960, 164-165) and Kripke (1963, 85), and is featured in the approaches to intensional logic developed by Bealer (1982) and Zalta (1983, 1987). For more recent developments of views of this sort in the context of contemporary metaphysical debates, see especially Gilmore (2013, 2023), and, in the context of semantic debates, see especially Rausch (2021).

full-stop) can be the very thing that one judges or believes (of something or full-stop). Indeed, belief is a basic norm of assertion. One's assertions should express one's beliefs, and so one should not assert that *p* unless one believes that *p*. Likewise, one should not assert of something that it's *F* unless one believes of it that it's *F*. Thus, though properties, relations, and propositions are identified, in the first instance, as assertibles, this is also to identify them, in the second instance, as believables. Moreover, while they are identified, in the first instance, as the contents of linguistic *acts*, they can also be identified, in the second instance, as the contents of a certain class of linguistic *expressions*: predicates and sentences. What is expressed by a predicate or sentence is just what it is that one says (of something or full stop) in assertorically uttering that predicate or sentence. Thus, this first way of thinking about properties, relations, and propositions identifies them with what we might broadly speak of as *conceptual and semantic contents:* the contents of assertions, the contents of the beliefs or judgments, and the contents of the sentences and predicates.

In a recent paper, Jeff Speaks (2023) contrasts van Inwagen's way of thinking about properties, relations, and propositions contrasts with a different and perhaps more common way of thinking about properties and relations, most commonly associated with Russell (1903). This is to think of them as "ways for things to be." For instance, *being round* is a way for things to be, and the Sun and Neptune are two things that are this way. For something to be this way, on this second way of thinking about properties, just is for it to instantiate the property of being round. Thus, the Sun and Neptune both instantiate the property of being round. This way of thinking about properties makes no reference, at least in the first instance, to our assertions, beliefs, or linguistic expressions; we simply refer to things in the world like the Sun and Neptune and the various ways that these things are or might be. Thus, whereas the first conception of properties and relations identifies of them as *assertibles*, this second conception of properties and relations identifies them as *instantiables*. Now, Speaks

himself finds the notion of a 0-place instantiable mysterious, and so opts to identify propositions with a special sort of 1-place instantiable: things instantiated by everything or nothing. However, the above thought unifying properties and relations with propositions, identified as assertibles, can be applied just as well in the present case of thinking about them as instantiables: whereas *being larger than* is a 2-place instantiable, and *being larger than Neptune* is a 1-place instantiable, the natural continuation of this thought is to say that *the Sun's being larger than Neptune* is a 0-place instantiable, something that's not instantiated *by* anything, but simply *instantiated*, once again, full-stop.

This will strike many as an odd way of speaking, and, I agree, it is. The oddness, I take it, is partly due to the fact that standard metaphysical parlance draws a distinction for propositions that it doesn't draw for properties or relations.[2] It is common to distinguish between propositions, denoted by clauses such as "that the Sun is round," and states of affairs, denoted by clauses such as "the Sun's being round."[3] The standard way of drawing this distinction is to say that propositions, which are true or false, are truth-*bearers* whereas states of affairs, which obtain or fail to obtain, are truth-*makers*.[4] That is, the proposition that the Sun is

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[2]Some philosophers, such as Bealer (1982, 1998), speak of (predicative) "concepts" and "properties" in a way that basically corresponds to the distinction 1-place assertibles and instnatiables. Bealer says "whereas properties can play a predicative role in the analysis of both propositions and states of affairs, concepts play such a role only in the analysis of propositions" (1998, fn 10). However, I'll eschew the terminology of "concepts" here as too ambiguous and too loaded with philosophical baggage to be worth taking on in the context of this project.

[3]The category of "states of affairs" is, of course, a contentious one, and there are various different views of such things in which the term is used differently than I'll use it here. As I'll use the term here, a state of affairs consists in an object's instantiating some property or some number of objects' instantiating some relation. See, for instance, Plantinga (1976), Johnston (2006) for this usage. An actual state of affairs is a fact, in King's (2009) sense. Some philosophers, such as Armstrong (1997), take it that there are no non-actual states of affairs. While adopting such an austere metaphysics is compatible with this account, I'll suppose here that there are also merely possibly states of affairs consisting in an object's instantiating some property that, in fact, it doesn't instantiate.

[4]This. In the context of a formal truth-maker theory of the sort developed by Fine

round is capable of being true or false, it is in fact true, and what makes it true is the obtaining of the state of affairs consisting in the Sun's being round. For a state of affairs to obtain is, in my terminology, for a 0-place instantiable to be instantiated (full-stop).[5] So, despite the new terminology, this distinction is familiar in the propositional case. It should be clear, however, that this distinction between truth-bearers (denoted in the propositional case with a clause of the form "that a is F") and truth-makers (denoted in the propositional case with a clause of the form "a's being F") applies just as well to properties and relations. Just as there is a clear distinction in the sense of the clauses "that a is F" and "a's being F," there is a clear distinction in the sense of the clause "that it's F," expressing what one says of something in saying of it that it's F, and the clause "its being F," expressing what makes what one says of something when one says of it that it's F true. So, whereas "that it's F" expresses an unsaturated truth-bearer, "its being F" expresses an unsaturated truth-maker. Whereas the former has a single gap to be filled in order to yield a complete truth-bearer, the latter has a single gap to be filled in order to yield a complete truth-maker.[6]

I take it that this distinction between assertibles and instantiables is an important one. To appreciate its importance, consider that, in many cases, two distinct assertibles can be made true by a single instantiable. Consider first a classic propositional case. At least intuitively, Lois Lane believes that Superman flies, and so she'd say that Superman flies if asked. On the other hand, she doesn't believe that Clarke Kent flies, and so she wouldn't say that Clarke Kent flies if asked. So, it seems that there are two

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(2017), we might more precisely identify the state of affairs consisting in the Sun's being round as the *minimal* truth-maker of the proposition that the Sun is round. That is, any other state of affairs that makes this proposition true includes this state of affairs.

[5]I take it that this should suffice to respond to Speaks's challenge regarding the intelligibility of the notion of 0-place instantiables. Insofar as the notion of a state of affairs obtaining is intelligible, I don't see how he can reject to my usage.

[6]Rausch (2021) speaks of expressions like "that it's F" as signifying "open propositions." We might analogously speak of expressions like "its being F" as signifying "open states of affairs."

0-place assertibles here: one that Lois is disposed to assert (because she believes it) and one that she isn't disposed to assert (because she doesn't believe it). Unbeknownst to Lois, however, there is a single state of affairs on which the truth of both of these propositions turns: the state of affairs consisting in *this guy*, the one alternatively known as "Superman" and "Clarke Kent," being such that he flies. So, though there are two 0-place assertibles (two propositions, in the standard sense), there is just one corresponding 0-place instantiable (one state of affairs).[7] This point is, of course, familiar in the propositional case, but it applies just as well for the case of properties and relations. For instance, before the discovery of the chemical composition of water, Aristotle, say, was disposed to assert of the Ilisos River that it's filled with water. Aristotle's not, however, disposed to assert of it that it's filled with H_2O. Nevertheless, the Ilisos's being filled with water *just is* its being filled with H_2O.[8] So, here too, at least intuitively, there are two 1-place assertibles—two different things that can be asserted of a river such as the Ilisos—but just one corresponding 1-place instantiable—one way for a river such as the Ilisos to be.

Now, Russellians about propositions have denied that there really are these distinct attitude ascriptions that I've suggested there are. On a Russellian view, the proposition that Superman flies is the proposition consisting in a certain individual (the one alternately known as "Superman" and "Clarke Kent") standing in some propositional relation R to the property of flying.[9] Since Superman and Clarke Kent are one and the

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[7]Here and in what follows I will leave open exactly what the identity conditions of states of affairs are—for instance, whether a sentence that picks out Superman with the use a definite description rather than a proper name picks out the same fact. A technical account of facts will have to be careful about this to avoid the sort of collapse argument considered by Neale (2002). There are different ways to go regarding in response to this issue, and I'll remain netural here on which way is to be preferred.

[8]At least, we may suppose this identity of water and H_2O for our purposes here, as is standard.

[9]R is, of course, notoriously tricky to specify. Russell himself (1903, 50-53) seems to have taken R to be simply the instantiation relation, thereby running into a problem about accommodating false propositions in his ontology, famously expressed by Wittgenstein (1953, §95; 1958, 31). In light of this problem, contemporary Russel-

same individual, and there is just one property that is flying, the proposition that Superman flies is the very same proposition as the proposition that Clarke Kent flies. Accordingly, since believing some proposition just is standing in the belief relation to that proposition, to believe that Superman flies just is to believe that Clarke Kent flies. I take it that there is something right in the Rusellian view. If we think about the content of a belief in terms of the worldly state of affairs on which the truth of that belief turns, then then to believe that Superman flies just is to believe that Clarke Kent flies; it is to believe something to whose truth turns on this one individual having this one property, whether one knows it or not. This identification, however, articulates the content of belief as the instantiatable on which the truth of the belief turns, and, if we distinguish assertibles from instantiables, we can maintain that there is an alternative articulation of the content of Lois's beliefs according to which her believing that Superman flies does not entail that she believes that Clarke Kent flies. This gives us the exciting prospect of being able to have our Fregean cake and eat our Russellian one too. We can have our cake and eat it too, that is, *if* we can provide a unified account of assertibles, instantiables, and their relation. Such an account is what I now hope to provide.

What, exactly, does the distinction between assertibles and instantiables come to? I've just put it in terms of the distinction between truth-bearers and truth-makers. However, to put it in different terms, I take it that it ultimately amounts to the distinction between represent*ings* and represent*eds*. Now, identifying assertibles with represent*ings* might seem like a surprising identification, since it seems to suggest that assertibles such as *that it's round* are *acts* of representing. That is, indeed, precisely what I want to suggest, as I'll now explain.

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lians have proposed various relations unifying object and property, such as predication (Johnston 2006; Soames 2014, 2015), being the semantic values of two expressions of a language that stand in a sentential relation encoding predication (King 2009, 2014),

2 The Act-Based Conception, Radicalized

One prominent theory of propositions to emerge in recent years is the so-called "act-based theory of propositions," put forward most notably by Peter Hanks (2011, 2015) and Scott Soames (2014, 2015). It's Hanks's version on which I want to draw here.[10] Consider a case in which Norm says, in English, "The Sun is round" and Maddy says, in Spanish, "El Sol es redondo." Intuitively, we're inclined to say that Norm and Maddy said the same thing, albeit in different languages. What they've both said is that the Sun is round. The founding thought of the act-based conception of propositions is that, when we say, for instance, "Norm and Maddy said the same thing," the surface grammar of this phrase is actually a bit misleading. What it is for two people to "say the same thing" is, really, not for them to stand in the saying relation to some object but to perform the same type of act. Specifically, on Hanks's account, both Maddy and Norm perform the act of referring to the Sun, expressing the property of being round, and asserting the latter of the former. The act-based conception identifies propositions with these complex act types. To say that Norm and Maddy both said that the Sun is round is to characterize both of their acts as being of the same type. On this account, the distinction between token acts of asserting and the types of acts of which those acts are tokens does the philosophical work that is traditionally done by the distinction between acts of asserting and the objects asserted.

Insofar as propositions are assertibles, the act-based theory provides an account of them. The twist is that, on the act-based account, the noun "assertible" is not to be understood by analogy to the noun "eatable," denoting some extrinsic thing to which one is able to stand in the eating relation, but, rather, as a determinate of "doable," where the class of doables is the class of things that can be done—the class of act types that can be tokened. One of the most fundamental virtues of this account is

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[10]Specifically, I am drawing on Hanks's earlier (2011) version, in which propositions are identified specifically with act types of assertion.

epistemological: rather than knowledge of propositions being knowledge of platonic abstracta which exist completely independent of us, knowledge of propositions is understood as a specific sort of self-knowledge, knowledge of our own acts and capacities. This is perhaps the account's main philosophical appeal. The account, however, is limited to 0-place assertibles; things that can asserted full-stop. Once again, however, not only can Norm and Maddy assert the same thing full-stop, but, for instance, if Norm says "The Sun is round" and Maddy says "Neptune is round," Norm says of the Sun what Maddy says of Neptune, namely, that it's round. A reasonable question to ask, then, is whether we can apply the very same act-based conception here. Doing so, the thought would be that when we say "Norm said of the Sun what Maddy said of Neptune, namely, that it's round," the phrase "that it's round" here doesn't function to *pick out* some *object* to which Maddy and Norm both stand in the saying-of relation, but, rather, functions to *characterize* the type of *act* that Maddy and Norm both perform.[11] Is such an act-based conception of 1-place assertibles viable? Most proponents of the act-based conception of propositions, I take it, would think that it's not.

Existing act-based accounts of propositions (like most contemporary accounts of structured propositions in general) appeal to properties and relations as primitive, articulating the acts with which propositions are identified by way of this appeal.[12] In particular, the act with which Hanks identifies the proposition is the act of referring (in a specific way) to the Sun, expressing the property of being round, and linguistically predicating (i.e. asserting) the latter of the former. Performing such an act, on

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[11]This basic thought is owed to Sellars (1969, 227-228; 1979, 72-73). See Simonelli (2021, 1049-1051) for an elaboration of this thought, as it occurs in the work of Sellars.

[12]At least, all accounts acknowledged on the contemporary metaphysical scene. Hoeppner (2023) proposes, on behalf of Kant, an alternative articulation of the contents of propositional acts and their components in terms of their relation to sensory experience that does not appeal to platonic properties. I do not myself see how this appeal to experience can be made to work, but I'll leave open the question whether it can, and, if it can, how such an account relates to the one offered here.

Hanks's account, one represents the Sun as being round, and so one who performs such an act speaks truly just in case the Sun is round. The idea of properties with instantiation conditions which one can linguistically get a hold of and predicate of objects, thus representing those objects as being certain ways, plays a crucial role in the account Hanks provides of the act types with which propositions are identified. It's not at all clear how, in the context of this account, one could eliminate talk of such properties for talk of acts. Nevertheless, Hanks expresses serious concern about the appeal to properties in his theory of propositions, recognizing that many of the same problems that motivate the act-based conception of propositions apply just as well to properties, and concluding that he "would like to have a non-Platonic story to tell about property expression," (207).[13] Fortunately, there is such a story to be told. One can indeed provide an act-based account of properties, as I will now show.

What is it to say of something that it's round? For Hanks, it is to "latch onto" (207) some platonic entity—the property of being round—and predicate it of something. But this is not the only way to understand what this act is. An alternative way to go is to understand the act of saying of something that it's round intrinsically as a certain type of predicative act, and articulate what it is to token an act of this type in terms of the relations such a tokening bears to the tokening of other assertoric act types. Thus, we can say, for instance, that saying of something that it's round is an act such that, if one tokens it in the context of a propositional act involving reference to some thing, one is precluded from being entitled to say of that thing that it's square, one is committed to saying of that thing that there is some central point of it from which surface points are (relatively) equidistant, and so on. To articulate what it is to say of something that it is round in this way is to articulate what it is to token this assertoric act type in terms of the role this act plays in a space of other such acts; precluding one from being entitled to token some such

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[13]See also Pautz (2016) for a critique along these lines.

acts, committing one to tokening others, and so on. No extrinsic platonic entities are needed. This general idea here is, of course, a familiar one. It is perhaps most familiar in the context of functionalist accounts of mental content according to which the content of a mental state is understood in terms of its causal role among a space of other such states (Lewis 1972). This specific version of this idea I'm appealing to here, developed most notably by Wilfrid Sellars (1953, 1956, 1974) and Robert Brandom (1994), by has been called "normative" (rather than causal) functionalism (O'Shea 2007, Maher 2012) since the role of an assertoric act is understood in terms of the specifically *normative* relations that it bears to other such acts. I will say more about the metaphysics of these normative relations shortly. For the moment, I'll take these normative relations as primitive and illustrate the work they can do.

There are two sorts of normative relations that on which I'll focus. First, an assertoric act (or set of assertoric acts) might *commit* one to another assertoric act. For instance, if I say of something that it's a sphere, I'm committed to saying of it that it's round. This is not to say, of course, that if I say of something that it's a square, I must actually say of it that it's round (this requirement would lead to us saying way more things can possibly be said). Rather, saying of something that it's a sphere commits one to saying of it that it's round in that one must be prepared to make this move (and defend it) if prompted. The second normative relation on which I'll focus here is that an assertoric act (or set of assertoric acts) might *preclude one from being entitled* to another assertoic act. For instance, if I say of something that it's round, I'm precluded from being entitled to say of it that it's square. So, if I perform or am committed to performing the first act, the second act is normatively ruled out. I refer to these two types of normative relations as relations of "committive" and "preclusive" consequence. As the example I've just given shows, in articulating what it is to say of something that it's round, we look both *upstream*, at the assertoric acts that stand in relations of

committive and preclusive consequence to this act, and *downstream*, at the assertoric acts to which this act stands in relations of committive and preclusive consequence. On this account, articulating these upstream and downstream normative relations that the act of saying of something that it's round bears to other such acts is sufficient to say what this act is, articulating what it is intrinsically as an act without thinking of what it is as related to some extrinsic object.

The same functionalist strategy just appealed to with respect to simple predicative acts like that of saying of something that it's round, can be applied to predicative acts which take propositional acts as objects. On the standard act-based conception, "It's not the case that" expresses the property of being false, and so, when one says "It's not the case that the Sun is square," one performs a complex act in which one expresses the property of being false, expresses the proposition that the Sun is square, and predicates the former of the latter. For Hanks, who takes the acts with which propositions are identified to be ones with assertoric force, this requires a complex (and potentially problematic) story about "force cancellation."[14] No such story is required here. Just as we can radicalize the act-based account so as to remove an appeal to the expression of standard properties like the property of being round, we can radicalize it here too so that no appeal to expression and predication of properties like being false is required. We simply ask, what is it to perform the act one performs in assertorially uttering "It's not the case that the Sun is square"? Well, minimally, it is to perform an act that precludes one from being entitled to assert that the Sun is square. Conversely, if one performs an act that precludes one from being entitled to asserting that the Sun is square, such as the act of asserting that the Sun is round, then this act commits one to asserting that the Sun is not square. In this way, one can specify precisely what it is to perform an act of negating some proposition directly in terms of the functional role of the act, without any

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[14]See Reiland (2013) for criticism and Hanks (2019) for discussion.

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appeal to an act of expressing the property of being false which is then predicated of that proposition. The same can be done for conjunction, disjunction, and other logical operators.

The normative functionalist account of content I've just sketched is, of course, controversial, and I will not give a sustained independent defense of it here. Elsewhere, I have gone through great lengths to show how one can account of the entirety of the content of expressions like "red" and "round" solely in terms of the normative relations between assertoric acts.[15] I have also shown elsewhere that the account of the normative significance of logically complex sentences I've just sketched is perfectly formally tractable in proof-theoretic terms.[16] Going through such details here would only distract from the main philosophical point. What I hope to show here, providing only the general contours of this sort of account, is that the philosophical work that such an account has the potential to do is so great that it at the very least deserves to be taken seriously in contemporary discussions of properties, relations, and propositions. The main argument of this paper, then, might be taken to the following conditional: *if* the normative functionalist account of content can be made to work, then it is capable of functioning as a key component in a very metaphysically and epistemologically satisfying account of such things as properties, relations, and propositions.[17]

The radicalized act-based conception of propositions, where these acts are understood, in the first instance, functionally rather than representationally, gives us an account of assertibles—*all of them*—in terms of their functional roles. 0-place assertibles are understood as *propositional acts*, whereas 1-place and many-place assertibles are understood as *predicative acts*. The term "predicative act," in this context, however, must be used

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[15]See Simonelli (2023).

[16]See Simonelli (2022, Chapter 4).

[17]This conditional is itself a significant claim, since the actual motivation for normative functionalist accounts of content is widely taken to be unclear at best. See, for instance, Stanley (2006) and the ensuing discussion.

with some caution, since "predication" is not what Hanks takes it to be—an act of getting cognitive hold of some property and attaching it to an object in the way that one might grab a sticker and attach it to an object. Rather, predicative acts, paradigmatically expressed by clauses such as "that it's round," are understood by abstracting what stays constant in propositional acts, expressed by complete sentences such as "The Sun is round," "Neptune is round," and so on, as different singular terms are substituted into the sentences used to token these propositional act types. This constitutes an important difference between the version of the act-based account articulated here and the standard act based account, enabling us to respond to one recent objection to the view put forward by Speaks (2020).

As we've already said, on the standard act-based account, the act of saying that the Sun is round is analyzed as a tripartite act in which one refers to the Sun, expresses the property of being round, and predicates the former of the latter. In the context of the standard account, these constituent acts are understood primary relative to the complete act of saying that the Sun is round. That is, the complete act of saying that the Sun is round is understood as a complex of self-standing building blocks—acts of reference, property expression, and predication—that are combined in some way so as to constitute a propositional act. As Speaks (2020) has recently argued, such an analysis faces problems directly analogous to the traditional problem of the "unity of the proposition" that act-based theories are advertised by their proponents as solving. On the radicalized act-based conception offered here, we adopt the opposite order of explanation. We *start* with a conception of what it is to token a complete propositional act, understanding such an act as being the particular propositional act type that it is in terms of its playing a certain functional role. We then understand the referential and predicative components which might be common to various propositional act types by abstraction. So, while we can still speak in terms of propositional acts containing

referential acts and predicative acts as component parts, as the standard act-based theorist does, we should maintain, following Ryle (1960), that, ultimately, these referential and predicative acts "are not proposition components but propositional differences. They are distinguishables, not detachables; abstractables, not extractables," (436).[18]

3   Attitude Ascriptions

On the account of assertibles offered here, what it is to perform a propositional or predicative act is understood in terms of the normative relations that this act bears to other such acts—what tokening that act commits one to, precludes one from being entitled to, and so on. I now want to turn to the account of these normative relations. The crucial point is that must be emphasized is that one's actually *taking on* these normative statuses of commitment and preclusion of entitlement upon making some claim can be understood only by thinking of that person as being (actually or hypothetically) *attributed* these normative statuses. That is, we cannot understand someone's *being* committed or precluded from being entitled some claims apart from thinking about someone or some group of people (actual or hypothetical) *taking them to be* committed or precluded from being entitled to those claims. After all, to be committed to some claim is to be *held* to a certain standard of conduct—to be held to making that claim if prompted, to defending that claim, and so on—and the notion of someone's *being held* to some standard only makes sense in terms of someone else (or some group of people) *holding* them to that standard. The property of being committed to some claim is only intelligible as an *attitude-dependent* property. An important question, then, in thinking

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[18]Ryle says this summarizing what he describes as "Frege's difficult but crucial point." However, it's not clear that Frege himself is capable of maintaining this point since it's hard to see how he can provide an understanding of propositions and their truth-values apart from their components (modes of presentations of objects and functions) which determine these truth-values.

about the normative significance of an assertoric act, is *in relation to whose attitudes* are we assessing this significance? That is, who is responsible for the attributions of normative statuses in terms of which the normative significance of an assertoric act is understood?

There are two possible answers we might give here: (1) some relevant member or subset of the actual linguistic community who may be more or less fully informed about the world (where this may be just the speaker themself) or (2) no one in particular, but anyone for whom the facts might be available. This distinction enables us to distinguish between two ways of thinking about a propositional or predicative act: first, in terms of what individuals in the linguistic community *take* the tokening of that act to commit the tokener to, and, second, in terms of what the tokening of that act, as it were, *really* commits the tokener to (that is, what normative statuses *would* be attributed by anyone aware of the facts). On the first way of thinking, propositional or predicative acts are just as fine-grained as they must be in order to account for any distinction in propositional attitudes we might find. On the second way of thinking, they are just as coarse-grained as their corresponding states of affairs, properties, or relations. In the next section, I will spell out how, precisely, to get an account of states of affairs, properties, and relations, out of this account of propositional and predicative acts. For the moment, however, I will continue to speak solely of propositional and predicative acts and the different perspectives relative to which their significance may be assessed.

Consider again the case of Lois Lane who believes that Superman flies but doesn't believe that Clarke Kent flies.[19] In distinguishing between two propositional acts here so as to make sense of Lois as not being sub-

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[19]For the purposes of the present paper, I will restrict my attention in discussing the case of belief, leaving to one side the question of how, exactly, to accommodate with other propositional attitude verbs such as *fears* or *hopes*, which seem to take propositional objects but which present certain challenges for proposition-based theories of the propositional attitudes. See King (2002; 2009, 137-163) and Nebel (2019) for a discussion of these challenges and some potential solutions. There are different ways to go compatible with this account, but I will not settle on one here.

jectively irrational, we are thinking of the propositional acts tokened in assertorically uttering "Superman flies" and uttering "Clarke Kent flies," as *Lois* understands their discursive significance. Lois takes it that one undertakes different commitments in tokening these respective acts. For instance, relative to Lois's perspective, tokening the first act commits one to saying that a caped superhero flies, that a Kryptonian flies, and so on, whereas tokening the second act commits one to saying that the son of Jon and Martha Kent flies, saying that a normal human being flies, and so on. We can distinguish between two propositional acts here by indexing the normative attitudes relative to which the significance of these acts are assessed to Lois's perspective. In principle, we can specify a different propositional act for each sentence/speaker pair—the act one performs in assertorically uttering that sentence, according to that speaker. There is generally sufficient widespread agreement among speakers that, when we analyze what one says, we *don't* do this, generally just speaking of "the" proposition expressed by that sentence, but, in cases in which there is disagreement, it is important that we *can* distinguish between the different propositional acts, relativized to different perspectives, in this way.

Though I won't fully spell out a formal semantic framework here, it is worth saying a bit about how such a spelling-out would go. I've argued elsewhere that a normative functionalist semantics, true to the spirit of Brandom (1994), would assign semantic values to sentences, relative to speakers, in the style of a dynamic semantic theory of the sort proposed by Veltmann (1996).[20] We may think of a semantic value of a sentence φ, relative to a speaker m, as a function mapping any "scorecard" m might have, keeping score on an arbitrary speaker n, to the scorecard that would result upon n's assertorically uttering φ, updated in accordance with m's "scorekeeping principles."[21] Now consider the following two sentences:

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[20]Nickel (2013) proposes a dynamic formalism, but the actual formalism he suggests is far too simple to be adequate.

[21]For a formal semantic theory spelled out in these terms, see Simonelli (2022, Ch. 4).

1. Superman flies.

2. Clarke Kent flies.

Relative to our perspective—we who know of the identity of Superman and Clarke Kent—these two sentences have the same semantic value. Since we take "Superman" and "Clarke Kent" to refer to the same person, we take it that someone who utters (1) undertakes just the commitments that someone who utters (2) undertakes, whether they know it or not. Relative to Lois Lane's perspective, however, (1) and (2) have different semantic values, since she does not take it that someone who utters one undertakes the same commitments as someone who utters (2). When we say, then,

3. Lois believes that Superman flies, but she doesn't believe that Clarke Kent flies.

we appeal to *Lois's* understanding of the semantic significance of those propositional acts—the semantic values of those sentences relative Lois's perspective. This is how we are capable of understanding how it could be that she believe the first without believing the second. We can say, precisely, the content of her two beliefs by articulating the commitments and preclusions of entitlements she takes one to take on in saying that Superman flies or that Clarke Kent flies, where these acts are individuated relative to her perspective. Her believing only one of these two things, on this account, is her taking herself to be committed to only one of these two propositional acts which are, at least from her perspective, distinct.

   This account can be straightforwardly integrated into a standard truth-conditional framework of the sort proposed by Heim and Kratzer by adding perspectival index in the way suggested by Asudeh and Giorgolo (2016).[22] The result is a kind of Fregeanism in that semantic content of

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[22]After this straightforward proposal in a standard truth-conditional framework, Asudeh and Giorgolo go on to suggest a more complicated formal implementation in terms of the category-theoretic construction of monads. I ignore such complications for the purposes of this paper.

"Superman flies" and "Clarke Kent flies," as they occur unembedded in (1) and (2), is distinct from the contents of those sentences, as they occur embedded in (3). Unembedded, the content is determined by the commitments *we* take one to take on in uttering either sentence, and so there is a single content shared by both sentences, whereas, embedded in the clause "Lois believes that," the content is determined by relativizing the commitments one takes on to Lois's perspective, and so there are distinct contents possessed by the two sentences. In this way, we can make the fine-grained distinctions in meaning that the Fregean can. However, there are no mysterious Fregean senses that are posited as primitive in this account. Rather, we simply have the idea of speakers who have differing normative attitudes in terms of which they differently assess the significance of same assertoric acts.

The same account can be given to make sense of our judgments regarding the truth of sentences like the following:

4. Aristotle believes of the Ilios that it's filled with water, but he doesn't believe of it that it's filled with H_2O.

Here again, our primary deployment of the concept of belief with respect to predicative acts concerns what we take someone to *take themself* to be committed to, not what we ourselves take them to *actually be* committed to. Thus, the predicative acts that are relevant for making sense of our natural inclination to judge that (4) is true are the ones defined relative to the perspective of *Aristotle*, who takes water to be a simple substance and so, when he says of something that it's filled with water, does not take himself to be committed to the claim that it is filled with a composite substance like H_2O.[23] It should be clear, in this case, that, articulated in a truth-conditional theory, the semantic content of "filled with water," as it occurs embedded in (4), is not the property of being filled with water. Rather, it is the predicative act one tokens on uttering this predicative

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[23]Let's assume we gave Aristotle a brief chemistry lesson, about what the property of being H_2O is, without telling him that it's water.

phrase, as its significance is assessed by Aristotle. By contrast, when we consider the same predicate occurring unembedded in the following sentences:

5. The Ilios is filled with water.

6. The Ilios is filled with H_2O.

We evaluate the significance of this predicative act relative to *our* perspective, and so these two sentences are taken to have the same semantic content.

This act-based account of opacity, based on the proposal put forward in Chapter 8 of *Making It Explicit*, is a major advance on Hanks's own act-based account of opacity on several counts. First, Hanks's account involves individuating "semantic reference types" in terms of a primitive notion of "semantic competence" with respect to names. However, the criteria for specifying what, exactly, semantic competence requires is unclear at best.[24] Second, Hanks is committed to providing a different solution to Kripke's (1997) puzzle with Peter, since he cannot say that the different tokenings of "Paderewski" in two different contexts constitutes two different semantic reference types. But it seems clear that any solution at all to these puzzles about belief should be a unified solution that applies equally to the Lois Lane's contradictory beliefs about Clarke Kent and Peter's contradictory beliefs about Paderewski. The account here provides such a unified solution. Finally, as we've seen, we can generate precisely the same sorts of puzzles with respect to predicative acts and properties. For all that Hanks says about semantic reference types, he says nothing about "property expression types" and how to individuate them with respect to semantic competence regarding predicates, and,

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[24]On Hanks's account, in the context of the fictional world, the names "Superman" and "Clarke Kent" are such that one "can be competent with both names and fail to realize that they co-refer. But outside the fiction, understanding the names 'Superman' and 'Clark Kent' requires knowing that their uses purport to refer to the same character," (132). Perhaps this seems clear in the particular case, but there are surely many cases that seem totally non unclear with respect to what "semantic competence" requires.

even if the strategy does work for referential acts, it's not at all clear that it can be carried over to predicative acts. The account here, by contrast, once again, offers a unified account of both phenomena. All we appeal to, in order to account for all of these cases, is the different discursive significance of propositional and predicative acts, as these acts are assessed and individuated from different perspectives.

4   From Assertibles to Instantiables

On the account I have provided, it is really *assertibles* rather than *instantiables* that figure as contents in a formal semantic theory. Open sentences such as "that it's filled with water" are best understood not as expressing *properties* but as *predicative acts*, whose significance may vary from perspective to perspective. Embedded in assertion or belief contents, they express the predicative act, as assessed from the perspective of the asserter or believer, whereas, unembedded they express the predicative act, as assessed from the speaker or evaluator of the sentence. But what about the *property* of being filled with water, the thing instantiated by such things as the Ilisos, Loch Ness, and my water bottle? Even if it is ultimately plausible to understand the assertible *that it's filled with water* as an act type, surely the property of *being filled with water* isn't an act type. This paper promises an "act-based account" not just of *assertibles* such as *that it's filled with water* but of *instantiables* like the property of *being filled with water* as well. How, then, do we get an account of something's being filled with water, the instantiable, from our account of what it is to say of something that it is filled with water, the assertible? The key thought here, which is once again owed to Sellars (1953) and developed by Brandom (2015, 2019), is that we arrive at an account of the property whose instantiation by an object makes true a corresponding predicative act by way of *transposition*. In particular, we transpose our account of assertibles,

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articulated in *normative* vocabulary, into *alethic modal* vocabulary.[25]

Consider first the simple example of something's being a sphere. Whereas to say of something *that it's a sphere* is to perform an act that commits one to saying of it that it's round, precludes one from being entitled to say of it that it's square, and so on, something's *being a sphere* is its being a certain way that necessitates its being round, excludes its being a square, and so on. Here, "necessitation" and "exclusion" express *alethic modal* relations, relations specifying how things in the world *must necessarily be* or *can't possibly be*, given certain conditions, and these alethic modal relations are correlatives to the *normative* relations of committive and preclusive consequence, specifying what someone is (indefeasibly) *committed to saying* or *precluded from being entitled to say*, given the tokening of certain assertoric acts (more on that parenthetical in a moment). The thought here is that a specification of the property of being round—the property whose instantiation by something makes true an act of saying of that thing that it's round—is just what we get when we transpose our specification of norms governing that predicative act from normative into alethic modal vocabulary. In general, the properties, relations, and states of affairs whose instantiation makes true corresponding predicative and propositional acts are accounted for simply by transposing the norms governing the predicative and propositional acts into alethic modal terms. So, something's instantiating a property, on this account, is understood as its having a certain modal profile, where a specification of this modal profile is arrived at through transposing the normative profile of a corresponding predicative act.

This is the act-based account of instantiables I promised. It's worth being clear, however, that, though this account involves the priority of the assertible, understood as a type of act, the relevant notion of "priority" here is *conceptual* or *epistemological* priority—priority in the order of

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[25]The account that follows thus bridges the two distinct notions of objectivity developed by Brandom: the perspectival notion of objectivity, put forward in *Making It Explicit*, with the transpositional notion of objectivity developed in this latter work.

knowing. The is no commitment here to *ontological* priority—priority in the order of being. If there was such a commitment, then this account would be committed to a problematic form of idealism. However, this account of what it is for something to be a sphere, where we articulate what this property is by articulating and transposing the norms governing the use of "sphere," is perfectly compatible with saying, for instance, that the property of being a sphere was instantiated by the Sun long before human beings ever existed and would still be instantiated by the Sun even if all humans went extinct. On this account, the Sun's instantiating the property of being a sphere is its having a certain modal profile: its being such that, given how it actually is, it's necessarily round, can't possibly be square, and so on. Following Sellars (1953) "The language of modalities is interpreted as a 'transposed' language of norms" (332). But the priority involved in arriving at modal profiles by way of transposition in this way is, once again, *conceptual* or *epistemological* priority, not *ontological* priority. Accordingly, this act-based account of what it is for something to be a sphere, which articulates the modal profile with which this property is identified by transposing the norms governing the act of saying of something that it's a sphere into alethic modal vocabulary, is perfectly compatible with saying that the Sun's and Neptune's both being a sphere—their both having this specific modal profile—depends in no way on us. Thus, this account of properties and relations is metaphysically *realist* rather than *nominalist*, insofar as properties are identified as modal profiles that things might (and, at least in many cases do) have completely independently of our norm-governed use of predicates. However, though the account is *metaphysically* realist, it is nevertheless, we might say, *epistemologically* and *semantically* nominalist, in that, according to it, one acquires knowledge of properties through mastering the rules governing the use of predicates, and, moreover, any articulation of what it is that we say of something when we apply some predicate to it is given entirely in terms of the rules governing the use of that predicate, without reference to the

property whose instantiation makes a use of that predicate objectively correct.[26] Thus, while metaphysical priority is assigned to (at least some of) the modal profiles of worldly objects, epistemological and semantic priority is assigned to the normative profiles of linguistic acts.

Now, I've given a simple example of how a specification of such a modal profile by way of transposition of norms might go, but, articulating a modal profile is generally a complex affair, with various different forms the specification of modal relations might take corresponding to various sorts of inferential norms that structure our predicative acts. The actual specification of such profiles is the task of a systematic formal inferentialist semantics, and, once again, I don't want to go too much into the details here, but one important distinction is worth noting. Consider that saying of something that it's a dog commits one to saying of it that it has four legs. However, this relation of committive consequence is *defeasible* since saying of something that it's a dog along with saying of it that it has lost a leg in a terrible accident does not commit one to saying of it that it has four legs.[27] When we transpose a relation of defeasible committive consequence into alethic modal terms, rather than saying that, if something's a dog, then *necessarily* it has four legs, we might say that, if something's a dog, then *generally* it has four legs. Thus, the property of being a dog is a way for something to be such that, if something is that way, then, necessarily, it's an animal, a mammal, it's warm-blooded, it can't possibly be a reptile, a donkey, or a human being, it generally has four legs, is domesticated, and so on. On this transpositionalist account, to say such things is to express the norms governing the act of saying something that it's a dog, but is, just as well, to articulate what it really is for something to be a dog.

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[26]Sellars (1956) speaks of "psychological nominalism" where I'm speaking of "epistemological" and "semantic" nominalism here. Now, Sellars also endorses metaphysical nominalism, and, while psychological nominalism makes metaphysical nominalism possible, it does not entail metaphysical nominalism. See Simonelli (2021) on this point.

[27]For a discussion of the philosophical significance of such defeasible consequence relations and an approach to integrating them into an inferentialist semantics, see Brandom and Hlobil (forthcoming).

The core commitment I am undertaking here in advancing this normative functionalist account of properties is that the property of being a dog can be articulated—*completely* articulated—by way of a transposition into alethic modal vocabulary of the norms governing the act of saying of something that it's a dog. Crucially, however, the relevant set of norms here is not the norms that *I* take to govern the correctness of act (though, of course, I take it to include those), but the norms that I am *actually bound by* in tokening the act, where the specification of what I am committed to and precluded from being entitled to can come from any perspectives more informed about the world than myself. For instance, in saying of something that it's a dog, I commit myself to the claim that it's warm-blooded, even though I always forget which animals are warm-blooded and which are cold-blooded, and so I do not know that I have taken on this commitment. In this way, we can make sense of the predication of a property of an object as ascribing to that object something that is itself *objective*—not determined by how we subjectively take it to be.

This last point gets at the important contrast between assertibles and instantiables regarding their respective fineness or coarseness of grain. We mentioned above that we can intuitively distinguish between the proposition that Superman flies and the proposition that Clarke Kent flies, saying, for instance, that Lois Lane believes the first but not the second. By contrast, there's no such distinction between the state of affairs consisting in Superman's being such that he flies and Clarke Kent's being such that he flies. On this account, the distinct propositions here are understood as distinct propositional acts, whose significance as acts is understood as relative to the perspective of Lois Lane. We arrive at the account of the state of affairs whose obtaining makes true these propositional acts, however, by transposing into alethic modal vocabulary not the norms *Lois* takes to govern those acts, but the norms that *actually govern* those acts. In specifying the objective state of affairs, then, we deploy our own better-informed understanding of the world in order to specify who it

is one is speaking of and what it is that one is saying of this person. When we do this, we specify a single state of affairs consisting in a single person—alternately known as "Superman" and "Clarke Kent"—being such that he flies. The same account can be straightforwardly carried over for the case of Aristotle's believing of the Ilisos that it's filled with water but not that it's filled with H_2O, even though something's being filled with water just is its being filled with H_2O. When we specify the property itself, the norms we transpose are the ones we take to really govern the predicative act, not those that we take it that Aristotle takes to govern them. Moreover, we can say that this property is such that not only does Aristotle not know everything about it, neither do we. Thus, when we ourselves use the predicate "water," we know we commit ourselves to claims about H_2O, but given that we don't fully know what it is for something to be H_2O, we also know that we commit ourselves to claims that we do not ourselves acknowledge. Acknowledging *that* fact is what it is to take oneself to be beholden to an objective property in tokening a predicative act.

5   Conclusion

I have given an act-based account of assertibles. Assertibles are understood as assertoric act types, identified in terms of their normatively-articulated functional role. These act-types are understood, in the first instance, as perspective-relative. For each predicate or sentence and each speaker who can assess the normative significance of assertorically uttering that predicate or sentence, we can in principle specify the act-type tokened in assertorically uttering that predicate or sentence in terms of its normative profile, assessed relative to the perspective of that speaker. Speakers take it, however, that they are all beholden to the way things really are in using these predicates or sentences. Thus, for each assertoric use of a predicate or sentence, speakers take it that the world itself deter-

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mines what they are *really* committed to. Our notion of the corresponding instantiable, articulated in alethic modal terms, just is our notion of this determinant. Thus, while assertibles are understood as perspective-relative, the corresponding instantiables are perspective-neutral; they are constituents of the objective world. The world, as Wittgenstein (1922) says, is the totality of facts. That is, the world is all the things that there are being all the ways that they are and standing in all the relations that they do.[28] The facts that constitute reality and the properties and relations that in part constitute these facts are the things to which we are ultimately beholden in saying the various things that we do, either full-stop or about particular things in the world.

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[28]I owe this formulation to Martijn Wallage (2016, 139).

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