

Propositions and the Power to Represent

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1 Introduction

Recent literature on propositions has claimed that the traditional conception of propositions, inherited from Frege and Russell, is untenable (King 2008; King, Speaks, and Soames 2014; Hanks 2015). Broadly characterized, the traditional conception of propositions holds (1) that there are propositions, (2) that propositions are the basic bearers of truth and falsity, and (3) that they are the basic bearers of truth and falsity in virtue of being the basic entities that represent things as being certain ways. The primary target of recent critical work on propositions has been the third tenet of this traditional conception. Here, I pinpoint the core problem of the traditional conception.

, considering first how it arises in Mark Johnston's (2006) recent attempt to explain how propositions, traditionally conceived, represent and showing then how it still arises in Jeff King's (2009, 2015) non-traditional attempt to explain how propositions represent. The problem, which I'll call "the relation relocation problem," is that the relation needed to bind together the constituents of a proposition so as to explain how it represents things as being a certain way, has to be relocated from acts of thinking subjects to objective entities, and the intelligibility of this relation does not survive the attempted relocation. After

showing how this problem plagues the traditional conception and one new conception of propositions, I conclude by showing how adopting one of the new conceptions of propositions, the act-based conception advanced by Peter Hanks (2011, 2015) and Scott Soames (2014, 2015) enables us to straightforwardly avoid it. On the act-based conception, propositions do not possess the power to represent, but rather, are the types of acts that we are able to perform in virtue of possessing this power ourselves. So propositions are not the basic *representers*, as is traditionally taken to be the case, but the basic types of *representings*. Since no relocating is needed, the relation relocation problem is avoided. The act-based account of propositions thus offers a promising way to maintain some of the key tenets of the traditional conception while avoiding its key problem.

2 The Traditional Conception of Propositions

Let's start with perhaps the most common kind of argument for the existence of propositions, (King 2011, Speaks 2014). Suppose that it is true that Clarke is strong. Suppose further that you and I have both seen him lift a car, so we both believe that he is strong. Finally, suppose that I only speak English and you only speak Spanish, and, in two separate conversations, I say that Clarke is strong by employing the English sentence "Clarke is strong" and you say that Clarke is strong by employing the Spanish sentence "Clarke es fuerte." Given the scenario I've just described, the following claim seems to follow:

There is something such that it is true, we both both believe it, I said it by employing the English sentence "Clarke is strong," and you said it by employing the Spanish sentence "Clarke es fuerte."

The "something" that satisfies the description here seems to be whatever it is

that is picked out the expression “that Clarke is strong” in the description of the scenario above. What is it that this expression picks out? It cannot be a particular sentence of a particular language, since there is no one sentence that we both uttered or would assent to. It is, rather, the one thing that each of the two sentences that we uttered express: the *proposition* that Clarke is strong. By positing a class of entities called “propositions,” we are able to make sense of scenarios like the one I’ve just described. To say that Clarke is strong, we are now able to say, is to stand in a certain 2-place relation—the assertion relation—to a certain thing—the proposition that Clarke is strong. One can stand in this relation to this proposition by uttering either the English sentence “Clarke is strong” or the Spanish sentence “Clarke es fuerte” because both of these sentences are used to say the same thing—that Clarke is strong. As Gottlob Frege (1997, 328) puts it, they *express* the proposition that Clarke is strong. So, to say that Clarke is strong is to utter a sentence that expresses the proposition that Clarke is strong. Similarly, to believe that Clarke is strong is to stand in a different 2-place relation—the belief relation—to the proposition that Clarke is strong. To believe that Clarke is strong, whether one speaks English or Spanish, is to take the proposition that Clarke is strong to be true. Finally, the proposition that Clarke is strong is something that *can be* and *is in fact* true. Since Clarke is strong, it is true. If Clarke were not strong, it would be false.

Being such as to be true in some circumstances and false in others is often taken to be the defining property that is had by propositions. Frege, for instance, specifies the type of entity that a proposition is by saying that a proposition is “something for which the question of truth can arise at all.”¹ The basic thought here is clear enough. Some things, like tomatoes, tigers, and mountains, are not

¹Frege called propositions “thoughts.”

able to be true, so the question of truth cannot arise with respect to them. A tomato can be many things—it can be red or green, ripe or rotten, big or small—but it cannot be true or false. The proposition that Clarke is strong, on the other hand, is the sort of thing that can be true or false. It is true if Clarke is strong, and it is false if he is not strong.² Saying that propositions are capable of being true or false separates them from some things, like tomatoes. However, it is not sufficient to pick them out and them alone, since other things, such as sentences, beliefs, and assertions, also seem to be such that they can be true or false. So, what many theorists say in order to pick out propositions and propositions alone is not just that they are capable of being true or false, but that they are the *basic bearers* of these properties. That is to say, while other things might bear the properties of truth and falsity, they are only able to bear these properties in virtue of bearing relations like the ones just specified to propositions that bear them. Propositions, on the other hand, do not bear these properties in virtue of bearing relations to other things that bear them—they are the basic bearers of them. Here is John MacFarlane on this point,

Propositions are usually thought of as the ‘primary bearers of truth value.’ What this means is that other things that have truth values (sentences, beliefs, assertions, etc.) have them in virtue of standing in an appropriate relation to propositions that have those truth values,” (McFarlane 2014, 49).

and here is Peter Van Inwagen, who makes this point even more strongly,

“When I say that a sentence is *true*, I mean that the proposition—a non-sentence—that the sentence expresses is true. [. . .] Similarly, when I say that a name is *honorable*, I mean that the individual or family that bears that name is honorable. I can no more understand

²For simplicity’s sake, let’s just say that if there is no Clarke who is spoken of when the sentence “Clarke is strong” is employed, this sentence does not express a proposition in that context.

the suggestion that a sentence might be true otherwise than in virtue of its expressing a proposition than I can understand the suggestion that a name might be honorable otherwise than in virtue of its being borne by an honorable individual or family," (Van Inwagen 2001, 34-35).

So, while we may speak of sentences, like the sentence "Clarke is strong," as being true or false, a sentence is only able to be true or false in virtue of expressing a proposition that is either true or false. Likewise, assertions and beliefs can also be said to be true or false, but, once again, the truth of an assertion or judgment is taken to be derivative on the truth of the proposition that is asserted or believed. The propositions that are asserted or believed are the basic bearers of truth and falsity, and an act of asserting or state of belief can only be said to be true or false insofar as the proposition that is asserted or believed is true or false.

Propositions, as they are traditionally conceived, are able to bear the properties of truth and falsity because they are *representational*. That is, they are *about* things, and they represent the things that they are about *as being* certain ways. It is in virtue of this representationality that they are such as to be true in some circumstances and false in others. Michael Jubien (2001) puts the claim as follows:

The essence of a proposition is to represent. Propositions represent [things in] the world as being one way or another. If they didn't represent in this way, it would be utterly implausible to view them as the ultimate bearers of truth values, (Jubien 2001, 50).

Trenton Merricks specifies the relation between a proposition's being true or false and its representing things in the world as being one way in terms of the following general principle:

[A]n entity is true because it represents things as being a certain way and things are that way; and an entity is false because it represents

things as being a certain way and things are not that way, (Merricks 2015, 26).

The thought is that a proposition is capable of being true or false in virtue of being about things and representing these things as being one way or another. If the things that the proposition is about are the way that the proposition represents them as being, the proposition is true; if the things that the proposition is about are not the way that it represents them as being, the proposition is false. For instance, the proposition that Clarke is strong is about Clarke, and it represents him as being strong. Accordingly, it is true just in case Clarke, the thing that is about, is strong, the way that it represents him as being. In this way, a proposition's representing as it does grounds its having the truth conditions that it has. Now, if we think that propositions are the primary bearers of truth and falsity, and something is able to bear these properties in virtue of representing things as being certain ways, then we'll likely think that propositions are the basic bearers of *representationality* as well.³ They are, we'll think, the basic representers. If they are the basic bearers of truth and falsity and they bear these properties in virtue of being representational, then it must be propositions, rather than sentences, beliefs, or acts of assertion, that are the basic bearers of representationality.

The conception of propositions that I've just laid out is what I'll call "the traditional conception of propositions." It is widely attributed to both Russell and Frege (Soames 2014), and is often adopted as the default way of thinking about propositions by many philosophers today.⁴ We can break it down into three main claims:

³Or, at least, the distinctive sort of representationality that is had by propositions.

⁴It is, in fact, not clear that either Russell or Frege ever held this view.

The Traditional Conception:

- 1.) There are propositions.
- 2.) Propositions are the basic bearers of truth and falsity.
- 3.) Propositions are the basic bearers of truth and falsity in virtue of being the basic entities that represent things as being certain ways.

Recent literature on propositions (King 2009; King, Speaks, and Soames 2014; Hanks 2011, 2015;) has aimed to supplant this conception of propositions as the default way of thinking about them. The primary target of recent critique has been the third tenet of this traditional conception, the claim that propositions are the basic representers (and the basic bearers of truth and falsity in virtue of being such). Theorists like King, Speaks, Soames, and Hanks claim that the traditional conception of propositions leaves us unable to explain how it is that propositions, taken to be the basic representational entities, have the power to represent at all. Their representational powers remain utterly mysterious. I take them to be correct in making this claim. However, it is not clear just what the problem is. Why is it that we can't make sense of propositions as the basic representers? Here, I will answer this question, and propose an alternative conception consider the recent attempt to account for propositional representationality articulated by Mark Johnston (2006), which has yet to receive a proper treatment in the contemporary literature, and articulate the core problem for the view, which I take to be a general one for the traditional conception. This will lead us to abandon the traditional account for a new conception of propositions.

3 The Predicative States of Affairs View

If we endorse the traditional conception and claim that propositions are about things and they represent the things that they are about as being certain ways, the following question can be posed to us: *how is it that a given proposition represents as it does?* On the face of it, it seems like we ought to be able to answer this question. We've said that propositions do a certain thing, represent, and so it seems that we should be able to say how it is that they manage to do this. Furthermore, since they are the basic entities that represent, we should be able to explain how it is that they manage to do this without reference to some other entities that do.

Perhaps the most common way of attempting to explain how it is that a proposition represents as it does is to adopt a view in which propositions are *structured entities*, consisting in certain entities bound together in a certain relation. For our present purposes, let's stick with propositions expressed by simple predicative sentences like "Clarke is strong," consisting of proper name like "Clarke" concatenated with a 1-place predicate like "is strong." On most standard views of structured propositions, the proposition expressed by a simple predicative sentence has as constituents an object and a property. If one takes the proposition that Clarke is strong to be a structured entity of this sort, one will take it to have as constituents Clarke, a particular object, and the property of being strong, a particular property. One might then claim that, since Clarke is a constituent object, it is about Clarke, and, since the property of being strong is a constituent property, it represents him as instantiating the property of being strong. Anyone making this claim, however, one immediately faces the following question: what is the way in which these entities are bound together in the proposition such that the proposition represents the former as instantiating the

latter (and, thus, is true if the former does instantiate the latter)? This question, commonly called “the problem of the unity of the proposition,” is the fundamental question that any structured entities account of how it is that a proposition represents must be able to answer. Without a satisfactory answer to this question, taking propositions to be structured entities with objects and properties as constituents does not suffice to explain how it is that they represent objects as instantiating properties.

We might start by considering one of the more well-known views of structured propositions which thinks of them as ordered n -tuples consisting of individuals, properties, and relations (Salmon, 1986). Call this the “ordered sets” view of structured propositions. Not many people endorse the ordered sets view anymore, and that’s because it’s not too hard to see what’s wrong with it. On the ordered sets view, the proposition expressed by “Clarke is strong,” consists in the ordered pair $\langle \text{Clarke}, \text{the property of being strong} \rangle$, where the first element in this pair is Clarke, a particular object, and the second element in this ordered pair is the property of being strong, a particular property. The problem is that we have no way of explaining, on the ordered sets view, how it is that an ordered pair consisting of an individual and a property represents that individual as instantiating that property. Suppose we employ the standard set-theoretic construction for thinking about ordered pairs. We then get that the ordered pair $\langle \text{Clarke}, \text{the property of being strong} \rangle$ is the set $\{\{\text{Clarke}\}, \{\text{Clarke}, \text{the property of being strong}\}\}$. Even ignoring the problem originally raised by Paul Benacerraff for set-theoretic accounts of numbers,⁵ that

⁵Benacerraff claimed that since several different set-theoretic constructions of natural numbers are able to do the same work in a mathematical theory, numbers cannot simply be taken to be the sets that are constructed in accord with one method. For instance, if one were to claim the number two *just is* the set $\{\emptyset, \{\emptyset\}\}$, then one would need to rule out the claim that the number two is the set $\{\{\emptyset\}\}$, but there is an equally good formal construction wherein the number two is taken

there are several equally good ways of set-theoretically modeling this ordered pair, the basic question is *how does a set like this represent Clarke as being strong?* It seems that, however we construe the ordered pair of objects and properties that the proposition that Clarke is strong is supposed to be, all we end up getting is just that: a pair consisting of an object and a property. We are never told how such a pair is capable of doing the representational work that the proposition that Clarke is strong is supposed to be able to do.

In light of the failure of the ordered sets view, it seems that we need to posit some relation in which Clarke and the property of being strong stand such that, standing in this relation, Clarke is represented as being strong. Call this relation, whatever it is, R . Now, it's clear that simply adding relation R as an element to the pair $\langle \text{Clarke, the property of being strong} \rangle$, to yield the ordered triple $\langle \text{Clarke, the property, of being strong, } R \rangle$ does not do the job, since we could raise the very same worries that we raised about the ordered pair. What we need to say is that this relation is not a mere constituent of the proposition but, rather, actually binds the constituents of the proposition together. Thus, what we should say is that the proposition that Clarke is strong consists in Clarke and the property of being strong actually *standing in R* to one another. We might call an object's instantiating a property or n objects' standing in an n -place relation a *state of affairs*.⁶ This proposition that Clarke is strong, then, is a particular state of affairs, consisting in the property of being strong and Clarke standing in R to one another. Having clarified this matter, we now need to say what relation R is. What relation can do the job?

to be this set.

⁶Jeff King calls such a complex a "fact." I opt for "states" terminology here, following Johnston. For both King and Johnston, the distinction between states of affairs and facts collapses, so it doesn't really matter here.

Clearly the instantiation relation isn't able to do the job, since false propositions—for instance, the proposition that Clarke is weak—exist. Since Clarke is not weak (i.e. does not instantiate the property of being weak), there is no state of affairs consisting in Clarke's standing in the instantiation relation to the property being weak. Since the proposition that Clarke is weak exists but the state of affairs of his being weak does not, the proposition that he is weak cannot be this state of affairs. So the instantiation relation isn't the relation we're looking for.⁷ A second, much more promising candidate relation, one that it seems really might be able to do the job, is the *predication* relation. The predication relation stands in an important relation to the instantiation relation. If *a* is predicated of *b* and it is instantiated by *b*, then the predication of *b* of *a* is a predication of a property to a thing that has that property and, as such, is true. If, on the other hand, *a* is predicated of *b* and it is not instantiated by *b*, then the predication of *b* of *a* is a predication of a property to a thing that does not have that property and, as such, is false. This makes predication a promising candidate for doing the job that we need some relation to do.

In his attempt to show how the problem of the unity of the proposition can be resolved, Mark Johnston (2006, 681-687) aims to articulate how we might take the predication relation to bind together the constituents of a proposition such that, being so bound, the proposition represents the object constituent as instantiating the property constituent. First, though predicating properties of objects might most readily be understood as something *we* do (to predicate a property of an object is to attribute or ascribe that property to that object in an act of assertion or judgment), Johnston says that we need to employ a notion of *objective predication*, a notion of a property's being predicated of an object that

⁷This quick argument might meet some resistance from the early Russell.

does not depend on anyone's predicating that property of that object in an act of assertion or judgment. On Johnston's view, the proposition that Clarke is strong is the state of affairs consisting in the property of being strong's being predicated of Clarke. To state the view more generally, for any proposition of the form "*a* is *F*," the proposition that *a* is *F* is the state of affairs consisting in the property of being *F*'s being predicated of *a*. For this view to work, we need to say that every property stands in the predication relation to every object. It might seem that we are overextending the reach that we have from our armchairs if we posit such a class of facts, but, if we're in the business of positing abstract entities like properties from our armchairs, then there doesn't seem to be anything obviously worse about taking them, in virtue of their very nature, to stand in relations to objects. We already take the property of being *F* to stand in the instantiation to all the objects that are *F* in virtue of its nature. Why can't we also take this property to stand in the predication relation to all the objects that are such that the property of being *F* can be predicated of them? Furthermore, why not take any object to be such that the property of being *F* can be predicated of it? Doing this, we get all of the simple propositions, and, furthermore, it seems that we are able to explain how it is that these propositions are capable of being true or false.

4 The Relation Relocation Problem

Promising as the predicative states of affairs view might seem, it faces a very simple problem: we cannot ultimately make sense of the 2-place "objective predication" relation to which Johnston appeals. Predication, like ascription, attribution, or any other relation that is able to play the same basic role, is

fundamentally a 3-place relation.⁸ When the relation of predication obtains, there is some individual x that is doing the predicating, some property y that is being predicated, and some object z of which x is predicating y . Roughly, if y is a property that can be denoted with the nominal expression “the property of being F ”, to predicate y of z is to say or think of z that it is F . So, for instance, to predicate the property of being strong of Clarke is to say or think of him that he is strong. Predicating the property of being strong of Clarke is a certain act type, something that individuals can do. We don’t get a complete state of affairs consisting in the predication relation obtaining unless some individual or group of individuals actually do it. Any actual predication of the property of being strong to Clarke must be a predication of the property of being strong to Clarke by *someone* or *some group of people*. Only by filling in the x place of this relation, the place reserved for the one who is doing the predicating, do we get a state of affairs. So, while Barry’s predicating the property of being strong of Clarke is a state of affairs (consisting in 3 objects standing in a 3-place relation), predicating the property of being strong of Clarke is not.⁹

NOW, Johnston recognizes that sense of “predication” that I’ve just described is the default way of hearing the term, but he nevertheless . He writes,

⁸Unlike “ascribe,” which is commonly used in natural language, the verb-form of “predicate” is almost entirely used as a technical term. At the very least, this is true for all of the relevant uses of “ascribe” in natural language. Just picking some out of the dictionary, consider the following instances of the property-ascribing use of “ascribe:” (1) “Tough-mindedness is a quality commonly ascribed to top bosses.” (2) “They ascribed courage to me for something I did out of sheer panic.” Our grasp of what it is that one says in employing either (1) or (2) hinges on our understanding that, when the relation of ascription obtains, there is always some individual or class of individuals that are doing the ascribing, some property that is being ascribed, and some individual or class of individuals to which that property is ascribed.

⁹Now, of course, if some individuals say or think of Clarke that he’s strong, we might employ the passive voice and say, “the property of being strong is predicated of Clarke,” leaving the reference to individuals that are doing the predicating implicit, but, in general, whenever someone says “ y is predicated of z ,” the question of *by whom* is always appropriate, the answering of which will make explicit the implicit reference the person who is doing the predicating or group of people who are doing it.

[P]redication of the property of being F of a may seem to be just the act of judging that a is F . But the objectivist must deny this [. . .] when I perform an act of predicating the property of being F of some individual a , I thereby relate myself in judgment to an objective entity, the predication of the property of being F of a ," (Johnston 2006, 684-685).

Saying this commits Johnston to saying that predication is *really* a 2-place relation, the one that, when it obtains between an object and property, you get a proposition. When we speak of predication as though it were a 3-place relation, speaking, for instance, of Barry's predicating the property of being strong of Clarke, it is really just shorthand for Barry's standing in the 2-place relation of judgment to the proposition consisting in the property of being strong's being predicated of Clarke. Once we make this explicit, however, it is not hard to see how this account of propositions hinges on a bait and switch. We have a grasp of what it is for an individual to predicate a property of an object, saying or thinking of that object that it instantiates that property. We're then told that it is this relation, predication, that binds together the constituents of a proposition. So, we take ourselves to have some grasp of the relation that object and property can stand in such that the former is represented as instantiating the latter. Thus, the claim that the proposition that Clarke is strong is the predication of the property of being strong to Clarke seems plausible. However, the relation that ends up being said to obtain *here* isn't the one that we previously had a grip on. We had a grip on a 3-place relation, but now we're told that the sort of predication that obtains in a proposition is a 2-place relation. The problem is that we don't have any grip on *what predication is* apart from our ability to think about it as a 3-place relation, and we're explicitly told not to think of the relevant sense of predication in this way. What, however, is the other sense of predication that is

supposed to be available to us?

Predicating, on our intuitive understanding of it, is kind of *doing*. To predicate a property of an object is to *do* something, to take some object to be some way, either in an act of speech (an assertion) or in an act of thought (a judgment). Of course, this makes sense if we think of a predication as a 3-place relation that obtains whenever some individual x predicates some property y of some object z . What would it be, however, for there to be a predication relation that obtains between a property y and an object z without any individual x predicating y of z ? It seems we have three options here, and none of them is very good. The first option is to hang onto our grasp of predication, understood as a 3-place relation, and say that for the 2-place predication relation to obtain is for there to be an exception in which the relation obtains with nothing occupying the x place of it. So it is for there to be a special sort of doing with no doer, an act with no agent. This, however, is utterly mysterious, and it is difficult to make sense of it at all. Doings and doers, acts and agents, seem to be reciprocally intelligible notions, and so it is utterly unclear what it could be for there to be acts of predication with no agents performing these acts.¹⁰ The second option is to let go of our grasp on the 3-place predication relation, and say that “predication,” as it is used here, means something quite different than what we mean when we say, for instance, “Barry predicated the property of being strong of Clarke.” Then, however, we lose the notion of predication that made the account seem plausible as an *explanation* of the representationality of propositions; we might as well just posit a primitive and unexplained relation—Merricks (2015) calls such a relation “zipping,” (154)—in which object and property stand such that the former is represented as instantiating the latter. Since our task is to *explain* the

¹⁰Sellars ultimately of, but note that the

representationality of propositions by thinking of them as consisting of certain entities bound together by a certain relation rather than simply *assert* it, this option won't do. Finally, we might change our minds and try to accept that predication is a 3-place relation but now claim that, in the proposition that *a* is *F*, it is *proposition itself* that predicates the property of being *F* to *a*. Clearly, however, this cannot be correct. The proposition that *a* is *F* is supposed to be a structured entity consisting *a* and *F* standing in a certain relation. Making predication a 3-place relation and having the proposition occupy the third place in it now requires that the proposition contain *itself* as a constituent, and that, of course, is absurd. On these grounds, the predicative states of affairs view fails.

On the traditional conception of propositions, a simple predicative proposition like the one expressed by "Clarke is strong" represents an object as instantiating a property. In order to explain how it is that the proposition does this, it seems that we must say how it is that the object and the property stand together in the proposition so that the former is represented as instantiated in the latter. Predication, it seems, is precisely the sort of relation needed to do the job. However, our grasp of predication hinges on our understanding of what *we* do when we predicate properties of objects thus representing things as being certain ways. There is no way to carry over this notion of predication so as to characterize what *propositions* do or what is somehow done within a proposition apart from anyone doing any predicating so as to be able to think of propositions as representing things as being certain ways. I'll call this problem the "relation relocation problem." Here's the gist of it: (1) We want propositions to be objective entities that represent things as being certain ways, (2) we find some relation that obtains in agents' subjective acts of representing things as being certain ways, (3) we try to relocate this relation from subjective acts of

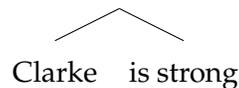
representing to objective entities that represent, but then, (4) having relocated it, we're no longer able to make sense of it because the place for the "doer" in the relation is, by necessity, left out.

The failure of Johnston's account illustrates relation relocation problem, but the problem is a general one for the traditional conception. Russell struggles with it when he speaks of the predicative element in a proposition as "asserting" something of the subject of the proposition, yet fails to give any account of what it actually is for the predicative element of a proposition to assert something of the subject (1903, 45-51). He analyzes propositions as having a subject, something about which an assertion is made, and a predicative element that contains a verb, which asserts something about the subject. So, in the proposition that Clarke is strong, Clarke is the subject, and the predicate "is strong" containing the verb "is" and the adjective "strong" is the element of the proposition that asserts something of Clarke, namely, that he is strong. But what sense are we able to make of the notion of *assertion* to which Russell thinks we can help ourselves? We know what it is for a *speaker* to assert something of someone, for instance, saying of someone that they are strong. To do this is to predicate of them the property of being strong in an act of speech. But what is it for an element of a proposition or a proposition itself to do this? Once again, the problem here is that we have a grip on the relevant notion of assertion, predication in an act of speech, as something *we* do, but when we try to carry this notion over to propositions to give an account of how it is that they, independent of us, are able to represent things as being certain ways, we lose our grip on it.

5 The Linguistic States of Affairs View

Some theorists, like Jeff King, have proposed non-traditional explanations of how it is that propositions represent. Like Johnston, King takes the proposition that Clarke is strong to be a state of affairs that has Clarke and the property of being strong as constituents. Unlike Johnston, however, King takes the relation binding together these constituents to be dependent on the relation that obtains in a sentence with expressions that have these constituents as semantic values.

King's view begins the observation that, when speakers of English see or hear a simple predicative sentence like "Clarke is strong" they take it to have a certain syntactic structure. They take its constituent expressions to stand in a certain syntactic relation to one another. Simplifying a lot, we might depict this relation with a tree as follows:



So, English speakers take the sentence "Clarke is strong" to be such that it can be decomposed into constituent expressions, the name "Clarke" and the 1-place predicate "is strong," and they take these constituent expressions to stand in a certain syntactic relation to one another, the one depicted here, in virtue of being concatenated together in a sentence. Taking Clarke to be the semantic value of the name "Clarke," taking the property of being strong to be the semantic value of the predicate "is strong," and taking "Clarke" and "is strong" to stand in this relation, speakers of English take the sentence "Clarke is strong" to be true just in case Clarke, the semantic value of the name, instantiates the property of being strong, the semantic value of the predicate.¹¹ This is because, King says, they take

¹¹King does not explicitly say what he makes of the copula, but I'll assume here that the copula does not contribute anything semantically, so the semantic value of "is strong" is identical to the

the syntactic relation depicted here to *encode ascription*. “Ascription,” as King is using it here, is basically a terminological variant of “predication,” as we were using it earlier with respect to the predicative states of affairs view.¹² Sticking with King’s preferred terminology, to say that speakers take the syntactic relation depicted by the above tree to encode ascription is to say that they take it to *ascribe* the semantic value of the constituent on its right to the constituent on its left. This syntactic relation thus makes it such that a sentence in which it obtains true just in case the semantic value of the constituent on the right is *instantiated by* the semantic value of the constituent on the left. Call this ascription-encoding syntactic relation “*R*.”

Having specified the syntactic relation *R*, King is able to define the complex propositional relation that binds together Clarke and the property of being strong in the proposition that Clarke is strong. Ignoring for simplicity the additions to it that King makes to deal with context sensitivity, the propositional relation is the following:

Propositional Relation There being a language *L*, and expressions *a* and *b* of *L* such that *a* and *b* occur at the left and right terminal nodes (respectively) of the syntactic relation *R* that in *L* encodes ascription and ____’s being the semantic value of *a* and ____’s being the semantic value of *b*.

Plugging in Clarke and the property of being strong into the open places of this relation, we get the following state of affairs¹³:

That Clarke is strong: There being a language *L*, and expressions *a*

semantic value of “red,” and this semantic value is the property of the property of being strong.

¹²There is a merely verbal distinction in that we ascribe properties *to* objects, whereas we predicate properties *of* objects, and there is a more substantive distinction in that we can speak of predicating *n*-place relations of *n*-number objects, whereas we generally only speak of ascribing properties to objects.

¹³King calls a state of affairs, consisting in an object’s instantiating a property or *n*-number objects’ standing in an *n*-place relation, a “fact.”

and b of L such that a and b occur at the left and right terminal nodes (respectively) of the syntactic relation R that in L encodes ascription and Clarke's being the semantic value of a and the property of being strong's being semantic value of b .

This state of affairs, consisting in Clarke and the property of being strong's standing in the propositional relation defined above, King claims, is the proposition that Clarke is strong. The explanation of propositional representationality is this: sentences represent things as being certain ways in virtue of having nominal and predicative constituents with objects and properties as semantic values that are bound together by a syntactic relation which ascribes the property that is the semantic value of the predicative constituent to the object that is the semantic value of the nominal constituent. Propositions represent things as being certain ways in virtue of there being sentences that do.

Note that King denies a main tenet of the standard conception, since, on his account, it is sentences, rather than propositions that are taken to be the basic representational entities. On King's view, the proposition that Clarke is strong involves the property of being strong's being ascribed to Clarke only in virtue of there being a sentence in which an expression that has Clarke as a semantic value is bound together with an expression that has the property of being strong a semantic value by a syntactic relation that encodes ascription. Unlike Johnston's view, in which predication is treated as fundamentally a 2-place relation, King's view is one in which ascription is treated as a 3-place relation that obtains between some x that is doing the ascribing, some y that is being ascribed, and some z to which x is ascribing y . Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, however, the things that fundamentally occupy the x place of the ascription relation—the things that do the ascribing—are not language speakers (King never speaks of language

speakers ascribing properties to objects), but the syntactic relations that obtain in sentences of the language they speak. In particular, it is the syntactic relation R that obtains when a name and a 1-place predicate are concatenated in a sentence. Though it is the syntactic relation R that is fundamentally playing the role of ascribing and not language speakers, language speakers are not left out of the story entirely. On King's view, the syntactic relation R can only be said to encode ascription insofar as it is *interpreted* by language speakers *as* ascribing properties to objects. Making this claim enables King to say that even though the basic representational entities are sentences, the ultimate *source* of representationality is the interpretive activities of language speakers. It is ultimately this interpretive activity that endows sentences, and thus, propositions with their representationality. Thus, the account is said to be a *naturalized* theory of propositions, one in which propositions "are endowed with their representational powers—truth conditions—by thinking agents," (King 2014, 48).

There are a lot of objections to be raised in response to King's view. My objection here, however, is that the relation relocation problem has not been solved. Though King, in construing ascription as a 3-place relation, avoids the incarnation of the relation relocation problem faced by Johnston, in taking syntactic relations to fundamentally occupy the x place of this relation, he has still taken it out of its home, relocated it to an unhappy place. Once again, on King's view, for a syntactic relation to ascribe properties to objects is for it to instruct speakers to interpret it as ascribing properties to objects. So, the syntactic relation R gives speakers the following instruction: *Interpret me as ascribing properties to objects.*¹⁴ The problem here, once again, is that ascription is, in the first instance,

¹⁴More precisely, the syntactic relation R instructs a language speaker who encounters it obtaining in a simple sentence to evaluate the truth of that sentence by interpreting it as a function f , applied to the pair consisting of semantic value of the predicate (a property) and the semantic

something that agents do. We ascribe properties to objects. If there is a sense in which we can speak of a syntactic relation as ascribing properties to objects (and I'm not entirely sure there is), it's in the derivative sense that, when we employ sentences in which the syntactic relation obtains, we ascribe properties to objects. In the basic case, the relation of ascription obtains when you have an agent x ascribing a property y to an object z . By making the fundamental entities that occupy this relation not agents but syntactic relations, the account King offers becomes utterly mysterious. Moving the locus of the ascription relation from propositions to syntactic relations does not solve the relation relocation problem; it just moves it.

6 Disambiguating Propositional Representationality

We've now seen two failures to explain how it is that propositions represent. We could, at this point, follow Trenton Merricks in claiming that any fact consisting in a proposition's representing as it does is primitive and inexplicable. On Merricks' view, a proposition represents things as being a certain way and does so, not in virtue of standing in relation to something else or in virtue having some sort of internal structure, but simply in virtue of being what it is. Representing things as being certain ways is something that each proposition essentially does, but, Merricks claims, "there is no explanation of how any proposition manages to do this," (208). Most contemporary theorists take this to be an unacceptable consequence of a philosophical conception of propositions. This has led some theorists, such as Jeff Speaks, to deny that propositions are representational

value of the name (an object), that maps object/property pairs to the value *true* just in case the property is instantiated by the object. This just makes precise the thought that what R is doing, in ascribing a properties to an objects, is representing that object as instantiating that property, thus representing truly just in case the object truly just in case that object.

altogether.¹⁵ I think Speaks throws the baby out with the bathwater here. We *should* deny that propositions represent rather than trying to explain how they do, but we *shouldn't* deny that propositions are representational. The key to solve the relation relocation problem is to disentangle two senses in which propositions can be said to be "representational." If we do that, we can simply not relocate the relation we need in order to explain how they are.

Consider again the question: *How are propositions able to represent things as being certain ways?* To take members of some class of things to be able to do something is to take them to have a certain sort of *ability* or *power*. The question, then, might be put as follows: *How do propositions have the power to represent?* The answer I'd now like to propose is that they don't have this power. Rather, *we* are the ones who have this power and propositions are the things that we are able to do in virtue of having it. So propositions don't have the power to represent, but, rather, are acts of it. This brings us to the "act-based conception" of propositions, which might be put with the following three claims:

The Act-Based Conception:

- 1.) There are propositions.
- 2.) Propositions are the basic bearers of truth and falsity.
- 3.) Propositions are the basic bearers of truth and falsity in virtue of being the basic acts of representing things as being certain ways.

So construed, this conception of propositions relies on disentangling an ambiguity in the expression "representational." Propositions are "representational" not in the sense that they do any representing, but in the sense that they are

¹⁵According to Speaks, propositions are "ways the world might be," properties that the world as a whole might instantiate, but they don't represent the world or things in it as being certain way.

the acts of representation that can themselves be done. It is in virtue of being representational in this latter sense that they are capable of being true or false. They need not be understood as representational in the former sense.

So propositions, on this conception, are certain kinds of acts. What kinds? Well, if we go for the act-based conception of propositions, there are a few options that we have:

- 1.) Propositions are acts of entertainment—in the simple cases, acts of thinking of something as being some way, (Soames 2104).
- 2.) Propositions are acts of judgment—in the simple cases, acts of thinking that something is some way, (Possibly Kant, Roedl Forthcoming).
- 3.) Propositions are acts of assertion—in the simple cases, acts of saying that something is some way, (Hanks 2011).

The most substantive distinction among these three options is between (1) on the one hand, in which propositions are acts that are intrinsically forceless, and (2) and (3) on the other hand, in which propositions are acts that are intrinsically forceful. The two leading proponents of the act-based conception, Peter Hanks and Scott Soames, diverge on this point, Hanks taking propositional acts to be intrinsically forceful, and Soames taking them to be intrinsically forceless. For the purposes of the present exposition, I will follow Hanks (2011) in opting for (3), identifying propositions with the types of acts that one performs in employing declarative sentences: assertions. Still, I don't want to commit myself here to the claim that this is the only viable option (though I do, in fact, think it's the best one). In all of these cases, the proposal is that propositions are *act types*. I simply use the expression "act" here, since it is primarily employed in natural language to speak of act types. An act is something that can be done. To perform an act on a particular occasion is to *token* an act type. A particular performance of an act

is a *tokening* of the act type. So, if we opt for (3) and say that the proposition that Clarke is strong is the act of saying that Clarke is strong, what we mean is saying that Clarke is strong is something that you can do, and something that I can do, and this thing that we can both do—this act type that we can both token—is the proposition that Clarke is strong.

To flesh out the view that propositions are assertional act types, let's recall one of the simple observations with which we started. I might say the English sentence "Clarke is strong," and you might say the Spanish sentence "Clarke es fuerte," and, in either case, we will have said the same thing, namely, that Clarke is strong. The traditional conception of propositions takes the expression "that Clarke is strong" to denote a propositional content to which we both stand in the assertion relation when we respectively say that Clarke is strong. On the act-based conception, we think of things somewhat differently. Rather than providing an analysis of what it is to say that Clarke is strong in which we take there to be some propositional content to which one stands in the assertion relation, we directly articulate what it is to say that Clarke is strong in terms of the structured act type that one performs in doing such a thing. In saying that Clarke is strong, one (directly) refers to Clarke and predicates of him the property of the property of being strong. One might perform an act of predicating the property of being strong of Clarke through the employment of the English sentence "Clarke is strong," employing the name "Clarke" to refer to Clarke and the English predicate "is strong" to predicate the property of being strong of him, or one might perform an act of this type through the employment of the Spanish sentence "Clarke es fuerte," employing the name "Clarke" to refer to Clarke and the Spanish predicate "es fuerte" to predicate the property of being strong of him. Employing either sentence, one is able to perform this

type of act, referring to Clarke and saying of him that he is strong. To say that Clarke is strong is just to perform an act of this type. So, two people, who speak two different languages, might both say that Clarke is strong because they both might perform the type of act that the assertion that Clarke is strong is in the language they each respectively speak. And to say that both the sentence "Clarke is strong" and the sentence "Clarke es fuerte" "express the proposition that Clarke is strong" is just to say that both sentences are such that, employing them, one performs the type of act that the proposition is.

A notable feature of this sort of account of what it is for two people to "say the same thing" is that the traditional distinction between acts of assertion and contents asserted is replaced by the distinction between particular acts of assertion and the general types of which these acts are tokens. To make an assertion is not to stand in the assertion relation to some assertable content (some "thing" that is asserted), but, rather, to perform the type of act that the assertion is. When we say that two people "asserted the same thing" we are simply tracking the fact that they made the same assertion. In this way, if we adopt an act-based conception of propositions, the distinction between types and tokens enables us to provide a new kind of explanation of what it is for two people, on different occasions, to make the same assertion. We just say that, in their respective acts of speech, they each tokened the same assertional act type. So, the token/type distinction is able to do the work that the act/content distinction has traditionally been employed to do, and now we are not burdened with the question of how it is that there are assertable contents which, independent of our acts of asserting, represent things as being certain ways.

Now consider the propositional attitudes. If we both saw Clarke lift a car, we might both believe that Clarke is strong. If we're both in a car that's stuck

in a ditch and Clarke is about to try to lift us out of it, we might both hope that Clarke is strong. If we both bet our life savings on an arm-wrestling match against Clarke, we might both fear that Clarke is strong. If we adopt the act-based conception of propositions, we're able to give a straightforward account of this class of attitudes—at least as straightforward of an account as someone who adopts the traditional conception. The only main difference will be with respect to the type of act that one takes propositions to be. If we adopt a view in which propositions are acts of assertion, we'll say that to assert that p is to make the assertion that p , where to "make" an assertion just is to token it. So, to assert that Clarke is strong is to make the assertion that Clarke is strong. We can articulate an account of belief just like that of the traditional conception. On a traditional account, to believe that p is to take the proposition that p to be true. So, to believe that Clarke is strong is to take the proposition that Clarke is strong to be true. The act-based account is no different here. To believe that p is to take the assertion that p to be true. Since an assertion is true just in case things are the way one who makes that assertion asserts them to be, to take an assertion to be true is to take things to be the way one who makes the assertion asserts them to be. So, since one who asserts that Clarke is strong asserts of Clarke that he is strong, to take the assertion that Clarke is strong to be true is to take Clarke to be strong. Attitudes like fear and hope can be treated similarly. On the traditional account, to fear that p cannot be to literally fear the proposition that p (what an odd fear that would be!). Rather, it must be to fear that the proposition that p is *true*. This is just what we say on the act-based account. To fear that Clarke is strong is to fear that the assertion that Clarke is strong is true. Since this assertion is true just in case things are the way one asserts them to be, to fear that it is true is to fear that things are the way that one who asserts that Clarke is strong

asserts the to be. So it is to fear that Clarke is, in fact, strong.

Finally, let's turn to our main concern here, the representationality of propositions. Like the account of Johnston, we think of the representationality of propositions in terms of predication. An act of assertion is an act of predication—an act of saying of some thing that it is some way—and the representationality of an act of assertion is to be understood in virtue of it's being an act of predication. There is an object that the act is about and a way that the object is represented as being. Unlike Johnston's account, however, we are able to understand predication here as a three place relation, involving, not just a property y and an object z that this property is being predicated of, but also an individual x that is doing the predicating. Once we reject the claim that the proposition that a is F itself represents a as being F , we no longer need a notion of the "objective" predication of the property of being F of a , a sort of predication that obtains apart from anyone doing the predicating. We can say, rather, that that proposition that a is F is the act type predicating the property of being F of a . For this act type to be tokened is for *someone* to predicate the property of being F of a , occupying the x place of the predication relation. Once we reject the claim that the proposition that a is F represents a as being F , claiming instead that it is the type of act that is tokened when *someone* represents a as being F , we're able to employ our intuitive grasp of the concept of predication, of saying or thinking of something that it is some way, in order to understand how it is that propositions can rightly be said to be representational.

Relocating the power to represent from propositions to the agents that token them, we make real progress in understanding propositional representationality. To explain the representationality of the act of asserting that a is F —the fact that, in performing it, one says something about a , namely, that it is F —we need to

do two things. First, we need to articulate what the relation is that one bears to *a* when one speaks of it in an act of assertion, saying of *a* that it is some way. Second, we need to articulate what it is to predicate a property, like the property of being *F*, of an object in an act of assertion, saying of that object that it is *F*. These, of course, are still serious tasks, but they are tasks on which we can make real progress. Our task is to explain a certain class of powers that are had by human beings, powers to speak of things in their environment and say of these things that they are certain ways as well as to recognize one another as doing so. We thus turn our puzzling philosophical questions about the representational powers of certain abstract entities into a set of much more tractable ones about our own discursive powers. That, it seems, is real progress.

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