The problem of the proposition, pt. 2

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1 What is the problem?

One of the hardest things about discussions of 'the problem of the unity of the proposition' is getting clear about what, exactly, the problem is supposed to be. Probably there are really several problems in the vicinity, but here is a try at getting clear about one.

Let's suppose that there are such things as propositions, and that they are expressed by sentences (relative to contexts of utterance). Suppose further that subsentential expressions, as well as sentences, have contents.

It seems plausible that the proposition expressed by S stands in some close relationship to the contents of expressions which make S up. This can be illustrated by example. Consider, for example, the proposition expressed by

> Soames is a Millian.

Could that proposition be expressed by any sentence which contained no term (whether simple or complex) which refers to Soames? It seems to me plausible that it could not. Much the same point can be made about predicates. Consider the proposition, p, expressed by

> This pen cap is blue.

It seems to me that we can make two plausible claims about the relationship between the words in this sentence and the proposition the sentence expresses:

1. No sentence could express p without containing a term which refers to the color blue.

2. No sentence could express p if it contained some term which refers to the property of being an ice cream delivery truck.

But one can generate plausible counterexamples to claims like this.

Against (1), one sort that we discussed last time involved *abbreviations*. One challenging sort of abbreviation is a case in which a whole sentence is abbreviated with a single symbol. For example, suppose we adopt BLUE as an abbreviation for the sentence about my pen cap above. Surely we could do this, and surely the resulting abbreviation would express the same proposition as the sentence abbreviated. But BLUE contains no term which refers to the color blue – it contains only one term, and that expresses a proposition rather than referring to a color.

I agree that this kind of case is possible, but I am inclined to think that it depends essentially on the introduction of BLUE by abbreviatI think ion. One could then modify (1) by adding the clause, "unless this was introduced as an abbreviation for such a sentence."

One might dispute this, and think that creatures – perhaps creatures quite different than us – could speak a language in which BLUE was a primitive term (i.e., not introduced as an abbreviation for a semantically complex term, whether public or private), and yet expressed p. I have trouble conceiving of such a case, but I also am not sure how to argue that it is not possible.

Also against both (1) and (2), one might look to idioms, as in 'but the speaker had an ace in the hole.' In some context, this might be used to express the proposition that the speaker had a powerful argument which he had not yet revealed.

There may be ways around these sorts of issues. But ultimately to get at the problem I am interested in I think that the detour through sentences is unnecessary and, as the above examples make clear, it's not even obvious that the relevant points can be made at the level of sentences.

Here is what I take to be the main issue. Our proposition p above is closely related both to a particular pen cap and to the color blue. This close relationship is such that it entails the following claims:

- Necessarily, anyone who believes (asserts, hypothesizes ...) p believes (asserts, hypothesizes, ...) something about that particular pen cap.
- Necessarily, anyone who believes (asserts, hypothesizes ...) p believes (asserts, hypothesizes, ...) of some object that it has the property of being blue.

(As stated, both of these might be unacceptable to someone who is both a serious actualist and who thinks that p can exist without the particular pen cap existing. But this seems to be a matter of wording. We could, e.g., rephrase the second so that it ended with: 'believes that some object has the property of being blue.')

We can then introduce 'constituents' talk as follows: an object o is a constituent of p if a clause relevantly like the first one above is a necessary truth; the property F is a constituent of p if a clause relevantly like the second one above is a necessary truth.

Our question is then: what are propositions, and how are they related to their constituents?

2 What, if any, are the costs of taking propositions and their relations to their constituents as primitive?

The simplest answer to this pair of question is: propositions are a sui generis category of abstract objects, and they are related to their constituents by being essentially about them; their essentially bearing this relation to them is a primitive fact, not explained by, for example, any complexity in the nature of the proposition.

I think that there is no direct argument which can show that this view is false. But I also think that this view has some costs, and that for that reason it would be better to come up with a different view of propositions. Here are some of what I take to be the costs:

- *Parsimony.* All things equal, we should prefer a view which does not multiply the number of types of thing we have to admit into our ontology. A view which took proposition to be a kind of entity in which we have independent reason to believe – a fact or property, for instance – would thus be (all else equal) preferable to a view of the present sort.

  (This is one way in which Soames' view, which is in some ways quite similar to the view sketched above, has an advantage, insofar as it explains propositions in terms of mental act types, the tokens of which are taken as primitive.)

- *The problem of brute necessities.* The picture of propositions that we get from the present view is something like this: there are infinitely many simple propositions. These propositions all bear necessary connections to other entities, like properties (the ones that above we were calling the constituents of those propositions). Here is an example: some propositions are necessarily such that they are true only if something instantiates the property of being blue; others do not have this property. (Or we could put this point as one about the relationship between a proposition and what someone who believed the proposition would have a belief about.) The problem is that nothing in the nature of these propositions explains why some bear this necessary connection to the instantiation of this particular property, whereas others do not. It seems as though we should prefer a theory which can explain this relationship between propositions and their constituents to one which cannot.

  One way to push this argument is via a Humean principle about necessary connections. But one needn't have any view like this in mind to think that some necessary truths need explanation. Consider, for example, moral arguments for God's existence – are these arguments undermined by the view that moral properties supervene on physical + psychological properties? Further example: explanation in mathematics.

Even if convincing, these are obviously the sorts of reasons which should count against a view only in the presence of otherwise plausible alternatives. So let's discuss some of those.