

Issues in the metaphysics of propositions: unity, modality, & indexicality

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1. THREE PROBLEMS FOR RUSSELLIAN VIEWS OF PROPOSITIONS

So far, we've argued for two central positive claims: that interpersonal intentionalism is true, and that the contents of perceptual experiences are Russellian propositions. However, there are a few well-known arguments which seem to show that the view that propositions are complexes whose constituents are objects and properties is unacceptable.

The first of these is, as is well-known, due to the Russell of the *Principles of Mathematics*:

The twofold nature of the verb, as actual verb and as verbal noun, may be expressed, if all verbs are held to be relations, as the difference between a relation in itself and a relation actually relating. Consider, for example, the proposition "A differs from B". The constituents of this proposition, if we analyse it, appear to be only *A*, difference, *B*. Yet these constituents, thus placed side by side, do not reconstitute the proposition. The difference which occurs in the proposition actually relates *A* and *B*, whereas the difference after analysis is a notion which has no connection with *A* and *B*. It may be said that we ought, in the analysis, to mention the relations which difference has to *A* and *B*, relations which are expressed by *is* and *from* when we say "A is different from B". These relations consist in the fact that *A* is referent and *B* relatum with respect to difference. But "A, referent, difference, relatum, B" is still merely a list of terms, not a proposition. A proposition, in fact, is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition. The verb, when used as a verb, embodies the unity of the proposition, and is thus distinguishable from the verb considered as a term, though I do not know how to give a clear account of the precise nature of the distinction.

This is often called the "problem of the unity of the proposition." One way to read Russell's discussion here is as showing that propositions must be something over and above their constituents. But then what could the extra ingredient needed to make a proposition be?

A second problem — due to Alvin Plantinga — results from the view — defended above — that the constituents of Russellian propositions sometimes include objects, like the coffee cup on my desk, which seem as though they could have failed to exist. The problem

is that it seems that propositions depend for their existence on the existence of their constituents, so that the proposition that that cup does not exist could not exist unless the cup does. But then consider the proposition that, possibly, that cup could have failed to exist. This certainly seems to be true; from which it follows that there is at least one world w at which the proposition that that cup does not exist is true. But for a proposition to be true at a world it must have the property of being true at that world; hence the proposition that that cup does not exist must have the property of being true in w . But if something has a property, it must exist; hence the proposition that that cup does not exist must itself exist in w . But if propositions depend for their existence on their constituents, then that cup must also exist in w — which contradicts our supposition that the proposition that that cup does not exist is true at w .

A third problem concerns the difference between certain indexical claims and the corresponding non-indexical claims — like, e.g., my belief that I am on fire, and the belief that JS is on fire. An application to the case of perceptual experience: seeing an apple as to my right vs seeing myself in a mirror with an apple on my right.

2. PROPOSITIONS ARE PROPERTIES

Let's begin with the first of the problems above: the problem of the unity of the proposition.

Russell's solution: the proposition is a fact; in the case of a relational proposition, it is the fact that the first relatum stands in the the relevant relation to the second. Why this is no good.

Could they be a fact of some other sort? King's theory: they are facts about languages (or other representational systems). Some problems with this.

An alternative: take propositions as primitive, and their relations to their constituents as primitive. Problem: the oddness of introducing a category into our ontology solely to serve as the contents of mental states and language.

I suggest instead that we take propositions to be properties. E.g., the proposition expressed by "Amelia talks" is the property of being such that Amelia talks.

On this view, the "missing ingredient" that Russell was looking for is (as on King's view) the semantic significance of the syntax of the relevant sentence. The idea is, roughly, that in English the semantic significance of concatenation of a name and a monadic predicate is the function from an object/property pair to properties corresponding to the open sentence

__ is such that x is F

Advantages of this view: (1) it reduces propositions to members of another ontological category; (2) it yields a very simple theory of truth; (3) it gives a plausible theory of the attitudes — so, e.g., belief is believing-to-be-instantiated.

The main problem for the view is demarcating the propositions. Exactly which properties are the propositions? A first stab would be: they are properties which are, necessarily, properties of everything or nothing. But this mistakenly counts “being self-identical” as a proposition. A second try: properties which are necessarily properties of everything or nothing, and which can be instantiated. But this mistakenly makes necessary propositions impossible.

3. CONTINGENT EXISTENCE & TRUTH AT A WORLD

Let Existentialism be the view that a singular proposition about *o* can’t exist unless *o* does.

Here’s a way of laying out Plantinga’s argument:

1. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is true, then the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> exists.	Serious Actualism
2. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> exists, then Socrates exists.	Existentialism
3. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is true, then Socrates exists.	(1,2)
4. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is true, then Socrates does not exist.	
5. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is true, then Socrates exists and Socrates does not exist.	(3,4)
6. Possibly, Socrates does not exist.	Contingency
7. If possibly Socrates does not exist, the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is possibly true.	
8. The proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is possibly true.	(6,7)
C. Possibly, Socrates exists and Socrates does not exist.	(5,8)

The argument is a reductio — but of which premise?

Plantinga took the argument to be a reductio of (2), Existentialism; and it is not hard to see why. Premises (4) and (7) look trivial on a first reading, and, of the three named

premises, Existentialism looks, at first glance, like the easiest to give up. After all, for most philosophers, the views that not everything exists necessarily and that if a property is instantiated then something instantiates it are among their core metaphysical convictions.

Reasons why not to give up on Existentialism: (i) the case for Millianism, (ii) Williamson's argument.

Some Existentialists, like Salmon and Soames, give up Serious Actualism; Williamson gives up Contingency. Both seem like serious costs to me.

Despite first appearances, I think that (7) is not trivial, and that this is the premise which the Existentialist should reject.

Why did (7) seem trivial? Probably because we have in mind the following view of truth at a world:

p is true at w iff were w actual, p would be true

Hence one might try to reject (7) by sketching another view of truth at a world, which does not entail (7). Here's one way to do that, in steps:

(i) Let's begin by assuming the view of propositions as properties sketched above, according to which the proposition that Amelia talks is the property of being such that Amelia talks.

(ii) Associated with each such property is another property, which we can call that proposition's truth condition. For any proposition P, we want P's truth condition F to be such that a possible world w instantiates F iff P is true at w. It should be uncontroversial that propositions have truth conditions, in this sense.

(iii) Note that since we are assuming actualism, we are assuming that possible worlds (like everything else) actually exist and actually have properties. When we talk about worlds instantiating truth conditions, we are talking about how possible worlds actually are — not about how they would be under certain other conditions.

(iv) Then what we need to reject (7) is a view of truth conditions which is such that the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist is such that, if it is actually instantiated by w, then, were w actual, the proposition that Socrates does not exist would not exist.

(v) Here's one: let the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist be the following property: the property of being such that, were w actual, Socrates does not exist.

(vi) It follows from this, plus Existentialism, that (7) is false.

Where should the Existentialist object? They might say that one their view, this assignment of truth condition to the proposition that Socrates does not exist does not falsify (7). This is correct but irrelevant. We are trying to show how a natural understanding of truth at a world might, given Existentialism, entail the falsity of (7); and I think that I have done that.

The Existentialist might also object that I have not given a general theory of truth conditions. This is correct. Why this is a hard problem to solve; the analogy with certain ‘deflationist’ theories of truth. How we might solve the problem by defining truth conditions by types of propositions.

A second response to Plantinga’s argument: we can present a kind of dilemma for the defender of Plantinga’s argument. This dilemma is intended show that, if (7) is true, then (6) — the thesis that some things exist only contingently — must be false. Either way — whether (7) is false, or (6) is — the *reductio* is blocked.

There are two ways to present the dilemma.

Take one:

Consider the following formula:

(E) $\exists x \diamond x$ does not exist.

If (E) is false, then Contingency (premise 6 in the argument) is false, and the argument against Existentialism is defused. So suppose instead that this formula is true. Then, given the usual understanding of quantification into modal contexts, there must be some world w at which an object o satisfies the condition expressed by “does not exist.” But this can’t mean that there is a world w which is such that, were w actual, an object o would satisfy the condition expressed by “does not exist” since, plausibly, it is not possible for there to be nonexistent objects. So it must be possible for an object to satisfy a condition “at” a world without the world being such that, were it actual, the object would satisfy that condition. But doesn’t this distinction — the distinction between satisfying a condition at a world vs. being such that, were the world actual, it would satisfy that condition — sound a lot like the distinction between truth at a world and what would be true were the world actual, which the defender of (7) denies?

Another way to put the same point:

It seems that the friend of Existence-entailing truth conditions must endorse the following formulation of the Converse Barcan Formula:

$$\exists x \Diamond Fx \rightarrow \Diamond \exists x Fx$$

For, if the converse Barcan formula were false, it would seem that there could be some proposition — the one expressed by ‘ Fx ’ relative to an assignment of a value to the variable — which was true with respect to some world without it being the case that any world is such that, were that world actual, this proposition would be true — and to admit this possibility is just to admit the possibility of a gap between a proposition's being true at a world and that proposition's being such that, were the world actual, that proposition would have the property of being true.

But if the friend of Existence-entailing truth conditions concedes that the Converse Barcan Formula is true, then the dilemma above re-emerges. For (E) plus the converse Barcan formula implies that

$$\Diamond \exists x x \text{ does not exist.}$$

which certainly seems false. So (E) must (assuming the correctness of the Existence-entailing view of truth conditions) be false. And in this case, again, premise (6) of Plantinga's *reductio* is false, and the argument against Existentialism is blocked.

4. INDEXICALITY

Now let's turn to the problem of the essential indexical.

We know from previous discussions that we often perceptually represent objects as having egocentric locations and orientations — as being some distance from me. How should the Russellian think about the contents of those experiences? A natural first thought is that we should think of their contents as singular propositions which have the subject of the experience as a constituent, and represent that subject as standing in, e.g., certain spatial relations.

There is an interesting variant on the problem of first-personal contents which arises specifically in perception. This is brought out nicely by the discussion of the perceptual representation of egocentric directions in ch. 3 of Peacocke (1992):

“Take first the construal on which seeing something to be in egocentric direction D involves merely seeing it as having a certain direction in relation to object x, where x is in fact the perceiver himself. This reading is too weak to capture what is wanted. This is because one can see something as having a particular direction in relation to an object x which is in fact oneself while not realizing that the object to which one sees it as bearing that relation is in fact oneself. Examples of persons seen in mirrors suffice to make the point.”

Suppose that I see someone in a mirror (who turns out to be me) and I visually represent that person as having a book to their right. It then follows that I visually represent that there is a book to the right of JS. This is the same thing, for the Russellian, as visually representing that there is a book to the right of me. But intuitively in this sort of case I need not visually represent that there is a book to the right of me.

(This argument assumes that the Russellian should treat visual representation of objects in mirrors as having contents which are singular propositions involving the relevant objects. This is not completely obvious — since, for one thing, it seems to make every ‘mirror’ experience illusory — but I think that it is plausible, so I will just ignore this assumption.)

A quick response from the Russellian: this is just another version of Frege’s puzzle, and the Russellian should give the same response here as elsewhere.

A problem with this: we can use cases of the sort that Peacocke seems to have in mind to generate a problem for Russellians who are also intentionalists.

The most straightforward way to run such an argument would be to try to construct a pair of cases of the following sort: in Case 1, I represent myself as surrounded by such-and-such features of the world. In Case 2, I represent someone (who turns out to be me) in a mirror as surrounded by just those features of the world. Case 1 and Case 2 will clearly differ dramatically in phenomenal character. So, if we can find a way to construct a pair of cases of this sort which are also the same in content, then it looks like we will have a counterexample to Russellian intentionalism.

Unfortunately (or fortunately) it is not obvious that we can construct a pair of cases of this sort. In the most obvious ways of constructing the cases, Case 2 will include some ‘extra content’ which the intentionalist can use to block the counterexample. (For example, in Case 2 I will visually represent JS as some distance from me — and in Case 1 I will not.)

Even if we don’t have a counterexample, there is some weirdness here — after all, on the present construal, Case 2 (at least a version in which I don’t know that the object I am seeing is in a mirror) involves me representing JS as some distance from JS — but intuitively Case 2 is not a case in which I represent myself as in two distinct places.

But maybe we can get a bit closer to a counterexample by changing the cases. Consider instead these:

Case 3: I am looking at a mirror reflection of myself. In the mirror, I see a ping pong ball on the floor in front of myself. However, I do not represent a ping pong ball as on the ground ‘outside the mirror.’

Case 4: As with Case 3, but that I do also represent a ping pong ball as on the ground ‘outside the mirror.’

Maybe we will then have no difference in content between the two experiences, since both represent the ball as in front of JS. The second one represents this twice over, but it is hard to see how this could make a difference.

If you think it does make a difference — e.g. because you think that in the second case I represent two ping pong balls as some distance from each other — then subtract the book from the mirror-representation in Case 4. You can suppose that the mirror is so constructed as not to reflect objects to the right of where I am sitting.

Now the Russellian can still, maybe, find a difference in content — perhaps in the determinacy of the representation of the relative location of the ball, or perhaps in the absolute location of the ball (if absolute locations are represented in experience). But this looks to me like an uncomfortable stopping point. It does not seem plausible to me that the phenomenal difference between these cases could correspond only to a difference in the determinacy with which I represent the location of the ball. For this reason it seems to me that the Russellian is at least better off if she can provide some account of egocentric representation other than the standard view sketched above.

The Russellian who adopts the view of propositions sketched above has a way around this problem: she can say that perceptual experiences are certain sorts of self-ascriptions of properties. This effectively locates the self-representation in the attitude, rather than as an object which is a constituent of the content.

This will mean that (pending a solution to the demarcation problem) it turns out that the contents of experiences are not propositions after all, since they are not properties of everything or nothing. But they are very closely related to such properties. If a perceptual experience has as its content the property F, then it will be very closely related to the property of being such that I am F, which will be a proposition.

(Possible side benefit: perhaps this explains why it sounds odd to call perceptual experiences true or false.)

This parallels the view that Lewis and Chisholm (and others) defend about belief and the other attitudes (and which Peacocke defends about perception). Nolan’s objection to this view: the example of the desire that I not exist. This is not the desire that I instantiate the property of nonexistence, as the Lewis/Chisholm view seems to imply.

This objection seems not to arise for the corresponding view about perceptual experience. Can the objection be reformulated so as to work in the perceptual case?