

Propositions and representation

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One way to lay out the space of theories of propositions.

1 THREE DIFFERENT VIEWS ABOUT PROPOSITIONS AND REPRESENTATION

One difference between debates about propositions and debates about properties, relations, etc. is that lots of people think that propositions represent the world; they are *about* things.

One reason for growing dissatisfaction with the ‘we can think of them as ordered n-tuples’ view is that ordered n-tuples don’t seem like they are about things; they don’t have a subject matter in the way that propositions do. This worry can also be brought against ‘sets of worlds’ theories.

A big question driving much recent work on propositions: how could abstract objects be about things? How could they have a subject matter?

Three answers:

- Anti-representationalism: they don’t.
- Primitivist representationalism: they do, and it is just in their nature to do so; that propositions represent is (in some sense or other) a primitive fact.
- Reductive representationalism: they do, but this is a derivative fact about them, which can be explained.

The most popular versions of reductive representationalism try to explain the representational properties of propositions in terms of the representational properties of thinking subjects.

2 REDUCTIVE REPRESENTATIONALISM

Common thoughts among reductive representationalists:

‘I don’t think anyone understands how it is that one thing could represent another thing ‘by its very nature’ independently of minds and languages. How could one thing simply be the kind of thing that represents something else? This just seems completely mysterious.’ (King)

‘The key move is to define what propositions are in a way that makes the derivation of their representational properties from the representational activities of agents plausible.’ (Soames)

How might we do this?

Soames: propositions are cognitive acts. Predication as a force-less mental act; the proposition that Amelia sleeps is the cognitive act of predicating the property of sleeping of Amelia.

More complicated propositions require more mental acts: negating properties; conjoining and disjoining properties. In every case we explain the representational properties of the propositions (acts) via the representational properties instantiated by subjects who perform the acts.

King: propositions are a kind of complex fact about (very roughly) the existence of a language which includes some sentence such that speakers interpret the parts of the sentence as standing for the relevant propositional constituents.

Propositions are the objects of the attitudes. So anyone who advances a theory that propositions are entities of type X owes an answer to the question: what is it to stand in a propositional attitude relation to an entity of type X?

Soames: ‘to judge that o is red is to predicate redness of o while affirming or endorsing that predication.’ Does judgement require metacognition?

King: not obvious. He considers the view that his theory of propositions works for the contents of sentences but not mental states.

Possible advantages of Soames’ view:

1. Explains how propositions could be about things and have truth conditions
2. Gives a ‘naturalistic’ account of our epistemic access to propositions
3. Illuminates otherwise puzzling semantic phenomena

Let’s look at the third. The key idea: ‘Because propositions are event types that involve thinking of things and predicating properties of them, two propositions can

place different constraints on how an agent thinks about their common predication targets, even if the truth conditions of the two propositions result from predicating the very same properties of the very same targets.'

Examples of 'representationally identical' propositions which nonetheless seem distinct: (i) articulated terms, (ii) Perry's shopper, (iii) Frege's puzzle. The idea that ways of cognizing give us more fine-grained propositions.

The problem of the unity of the proposition; how the problem arises for Soames' theory. A parallel worry about Soames' theory of the attitudes.

Two worries about propositional scarcity. (1) Not enough current propositions. Soames: 'One might have supposed that for each molecule in the universe, the proposition that it is a molecule exists and is true.' but apparent no acts/facts about most such molecules. (2) Not enough propositions in the past, before there were thinkers. Propositions are eternal (it was always true that $2+2=4$), but Soames' acts and King's facts don't seem to be.

Soames: propositions can be true without existing. More generally: things can have properties/stand in relations without existing.

King's response to (1): variable assignments.

King's response to (2): the distinction between truth in a world/time and truth at a world/time.

Some reasons why Millians who are contingentists have some reason to take one of these two lines.

3 PRIMITIVIST REPRESENTATIONALISM

The primitivist agrees that propositions represent, but denies that this fact about propositions needs explanation. It is just in their nature to represent. These can be, and are usually taken to be, simple (lacking constituents) and more fine-grained than sets of possible worlds.

Soames and King think of propositions as structured. Most primitivists deny this. Keller's challenge to the structured theorists: why postulate structure? Standard reply: to explain how propositions can be about things; they are about their constituents. Keller's dilemma: either (i) constituency is parthood or (ii) it is primitive. If (i), it can't explain aboutness; things are not in general about their parts. (Plus on standard views parthood is transitive, and a proposition can be about me but not about my big toe.) If (ii), it looks like we're labelling the relation of aboutness rather than explaining it.

Merricks: propositions are necessarily existing abstract objects which have their representational properties essentially. There is no attempt to explain them in terms of anything else. Compare: theories of universals that take them as fundamental.

Objection: somewhat mysterious how to do compositional semantics on this view.

4 PROPERTY THEORIES

More generally: the idea that propositions are the same general sort of thing as properties and relations.

4.1 *Do propositions represent?*

One challenge to property theories: properties don't represent, and propositions do. Reply: properties are true of things. Is this enough?

Some say: propositions are *about* things in a way that properties are not. Reasons for thinking this:

- Needed to explain representational properties of mental states.
- Needed to explain how propositions can be true or false.
- Ordinary language claims about propositions.

Examples of the last: 'That argument depends on some assumptions about XYZ', 'That is a theory about XYZ.'

Two different interpretations of claims like: the x's and the y's are both F, but the x's are the primary bearers of F-ness. Same-property vs. related-property reductions. Example of the former: location, mass. Example of the latter: healthy.

Some reason to think that 'representation' claims about subjects and propositions are in the latter category. But then no need to explain what propositions could be such that they inherit the representational properties of subjects: there are no such properties.

A possible model: predications of tools/tool users. Examples:

Chainsaws cut down trees. So do lumberjacks.

Briefs sometimes persuade judges. So do lawyers.

Experiments test theories. So do scientists.

Logicism represents mathematics as reducible to logic. So did Russell.

Property theorists can say that propositions are the means by which we represent the world – propositional attitudes are a matter of taking properties to be instantiated. So maybe unsurprising that we predicate representational properties of them in the same way we do in the above cases.

4.2 *Monadic vs. 0-place property theories*

Some (including Mark Richard and me) defend the idea that propositions are monadic properties. One idea is that they are properties like

x is such that Amelia talks

which are true iff instantiated. What does this theory say about the attitudes?

One question for views like this: what distinguishes the monadic properties which are propositions from the ones which aren't? Further, why identify propositions with monadic properties like the one mentioned rather than dyadic relations like

x and y are such that Amelia talks

Argument against monadic property views: the plugging argument. Seems to show that sentences express 0-adic relations, not monadic properties.

Does the idea that there are 0-adic relations make sense? Are there -1-adic relations? Two 'core conceptions' of properties: as ways things can be, and as things that can be said of things.

Suppose that there are 0-adic relations. Then we could explain how they have truth conditions in ways parallel to how we might explain how

x is taller than y
Bob

combine to determine the instantiation conditions of

x is taller than Bob

Gilmore calls these 'holding conditions.' More generally, there are holding relations of various adicities. Suppose that Sally is taller than Bob. Then:

HOLDS₃(is taller than, Sally, Bob)
HOLDS₂(is taller than Bob, Sally)

and, crucially,

HOLDS₁(Sally is taller than Bob)

The idea is then that the above claim is true, and that the conditions under which a 0-adic property holds₁ are that propositions truth conditions. So, if we have explained holding conditions, we have explained truth conditions.