

A neat and tidy picture

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September 18, 2023

Cartwright argues that (i) there are entities, propositions, which are the things we assert, (ii) these are distinct from acts of asserting, from sentences uttered, and from the meanings of sentences, and (iii) we ascribe truth and falsity to these things.

1 SOME WIDELY HELD VIEWS

Contemporary orthodoxy assigns propositions four main theoretical roles:

1. the objects of propositional attitudes like belief
2. the primary bearers of truth and falsity
3. the semantic contents of sentences relative to contexts
4. the semantic values of that-clauses (among other linguistic constructions)

Cartwright's conclusion stops well short of the claim that propositions satisfy all of roles (1)-(4) – he doesn't show that propositions have any of these theoretical roles (though he takes steps towards (1), (2), and (4)).

How do we get from Cartwright to the contemporary orthodoxy?

2 THE OBJECTS OF THE ATTITUDES

First, consider the question of whether the things we assert are the same as the things we believe, suppose, allege, etc. Two routes to a positive answer.

2.1 Attitude ascriptions

First route: via sentences which seem to make reference to propositions. If we consider the sentences

Daniel believes that properties exist.

Jeff asserts that properties exist.

Michael denies that properties exist.

they seem to jointly entail sentences like

There is something that Daniel believes and Michael denies.

Jeff asserted what Daniel believes.

How might we understand the logical forms of these sentences in such a way as to explain these entailments? A natural idea: the first bunch all are of the form

aRb

whereas the second pair are both quantifying over propositions. So e.g. a simple logical form for the first might be

$\exists x(\text{Daniel believes } x \ \& \ \text{Michael denies } x)$

Some further support for this treatment of these sentences comes from consideration of names for propositions. Let 'logicism' name the proposition that mathematics reduces to logic. Then one might think that the following say the same thing:

Russell believed that mathematics reduces to logic.

Russell believed logicism.

But isn't the latter obviously of the form aRb ?

2.2 *Connections between mental states*

Second route: via connections between mental states of certain types. If we ask why someone asserted something often part of the explanation is that they believe it. The simplest model of this is that belief and assertion are relations to the same type of entity.

More generally: distinguish between arguments from properties of the ascriptions of mental states from arguments from properties of the mental states themselves. Some more examples of the latter:

- explaining the distinctions between true and false beliefs / satisfied unsatisfied desires / accurate vs. inaccurate perceptual experiences.

- explaining action. Why did A ϕ ? Because ϕ ing would satisfy A 's desires in a world in which A 's beliefs are true
- explaining the transitions between mental states
- (more contentious) explaining phenomenal properties

So far: a reasonable case that there is a kind of thing which satisfies (1) and (4).

3 THE SEMANTIC CONTENTS OF SENTENCES RELATIVE TO CONTEXTS

How about role (3)? Cartwright seems to oppose the idea that propositions could play this role; he argues, after all, that the meaning of a sentence is not the sort of thing we can assert.

A first step in replying to Cartwright: distinguish between two dimensions of meaning which, following Kaplan (1977/1989), we can call 'character' and 'content.'

Consider the sentence

I am hungry.

first as uttered by me, and then as uttered by Daniel. As Cartwright says, there is a sense in which the sentence has the same meaning on the two occasions. But there is also a sense in which the sentence has a different meaning on the two occasions. The first use says something about me, whereas the second use says something about Daniel. If I were to utter the sentence and Daniel were to utter its negation, we would not be disagreeing.

Kaplan's idea is that 'I' has the same character on each occasion of use. This character is a function from contexts of utterance to individuals — the individual who is the speaker in that context of utterance. That individual is the content of 'I' on that occasion of use.

Parallel cases: 'here,' 'now.' More complicated: 'this,' 'that,' deictic pronouns. More complicated still: gradable adjectives, modal constructions, ...

Cartwright is correct that propositions cannot be identified with the characters of sentences. But perhaps they can still be identified with the contents of sentences relative to contexts.

Why think this?

First reason: we use sentences to express our beliefs and make assertions. But propositions are the contents of our beliefs and assertions. Simplest model of how we can

use sentences to express beliefs and make assertions: the sentences express propositions (relative to contexts). (This is consistent with the obvious fact that what we assert typically goes well beyond the semantic content of the sentence uttered.)

Second reason: much contemporary philosophy of language and linguistics takes as its starting point this remark from Frege:

‘It is astonishing what language can do. With a few syllables it can express an incalculable number of thoughts, so that even a thought grasped by a human being for the very first time can be put into a form of words which will be understood by someone to whom the thought is entirely new.’ (Frege (1923/1963))

Standard thought: our ability to understand novel utterances has to be explained by our having internalized (in some sense or other) a compositional semantic theory. One form such a theory might take: a theory whose output is a pairing of sentence/context pairs with propositions.

A range of alternatives: Davidsonian semantics, Chomskyan internalist semantics, dynamic approaches.

4 THE PRIMARY BEARERS OF TRUTH AND FALSITY

We already saw in Cartwright an argument that the things we assert can be true or false. Ditto for the things we believe, allege, deny, etc.

A standard thought goes beyond this and says that propositions are the *primary* bearers of truth and falsity. The idea is that other things can be true or false — e.g. utterances, inscriptions, belief states — but that these are all true or false in virtue of their relation to a proposition which is true or false.

Why think this? Principles like the following appear to be necessary:

if S expresses p in C , then S is true in C iff p is true
if a belief b has the content p , then b is true iff p is true

It would be surprising if this were a coincidence.

Why explain the truth of sentences and beliefs in terms of propositions, rather than the other way around? Frege again:

‘the thought we have expressed in the Pythagorean Theorem is timelessly true, true independently of whether anyone takes it to be true. It needs no owner. It is not true only from the time when it is discovered; just as a planet, even before anyone saw it, was in interaction with other planets.’ (Frege (1918))

The Pythagorean theorem was true before there were sentences or beliefs; so, we can't explain the truth of propositions in terms of the truth of sentences or beliefs.

(We'll later see that some recent theories of propositions reject this idea.)

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In making the case for the idea that propositions exist and play theoretical roles (1)-(4), we've made use of the idea that propositions are designated by a wide variety of natural language constructions: that-clauses, wh-clauses ('what Daniel believes'), definite descriptions ('the proposition that mathematics reduces to logic'), propositional anaphora, and names ('logicism')

This is a nice, tidy picture which allows us to understand the behavior of a wide variety of English sentences. If only it were true.

REFERENCES

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