

What are Propositions? Do We Have 'Attitudes' Toward Them?

Abstract: Propositions are thought to differ from sentences in the following ways: (1) Propositions are declarative sentences that in context present the 'content' of S's thought. (2) A proposition is metaphorically 'what is said' by a declarative sentence. (3) Different sentences in context can mean 'the same thing' or have 'the same meaning'; i.e., different sentences can express the *same* proposition (relative to context). (4) Propositions (as descriptive assertions) are true or false in context. These four intuitions seem satisfactory. In addition to these, it is also thought that: (5) A proposition is essentially true or false and (6) Persons have 'attitudes' towards propositions. I argue that the last two intuitions are false. I argue that (1) speakers can assert propositions that are 'truth-apt' or 'non-truth-apt' and (2) persons don't have an 'attitude' relationship to propositions. This essay will explore our linguistic intuitions (and stipulate a definition) for the term 'proposition.'

Introduction

The term 'proposition' has a broad and diverse use in philosophy. 'Propositions' are generally postulated in order to explain how different sentences can have the same meaning. Propositions are associated with the concepts of 'sentence' and 'truth' where different sentences may be expressed to 'say the same thing,' and thus, have the same truth value. A proposition is often said to be the 'content' or 'meaning' of a declarative sentence. Metaphorically, a proposition is 'what is said' by a declarative sentence. Many metaphysicians believe that propositions objectively exist and are theoretically identifiable within a network of associated concepts: persons, sentences, meaning, truth, and attitudes. A 'proposition' is understood as not being a form of words, nor a linguistic

entity of any kind. Michael Loux (2006) states that metaphysical realists believe propositions are "language-independent and mind-independent abstract entities that function as the objects of acts of assertion/denial and acts of thinking; they are also the referents of that-clauses; and they are the primary bearers of the truth values and, hence, the things that, in the first instance, enter into logical relations" (p. 121). E.J. Lowe (2000) states "Most philosophers would say that propositions are *abstract* entities and thus akin ontologically to the objects of mathematics, such as numbers and sets" (p. 71). William Lycan (2008) states propositions are 'language independent' because they are not tied to any particular natural language. Propositions are independent of persons and are entirely general and eternal. Propositions are the 'thinkables' of language (pp. 68-69).

Propositions are associated with theories of linguistic reference. One historically important motive for supposing the existence of propositions is that they provide the subject matter for logic; something for logic to be about. Propositions are the sorts of entities that stand necessarily to relations such as entailment and contradiction, and these relations constitute the grounds of valid and invalid inference and are reflected in linguistic formulations. A proposition is composed of the meanings of the individual words or phrases making up different sentences which are used to express a proposition.

Within possible world semantics, a sentence (or formula) expresses or denotes a proposition. With the concepts of intension and extension, Richard Montague's (1973) PTQ model first developed a grammar for English (i.e., a fragment of English) that maps English sentences first onto an intensional logic. Montague takes the denotation of a sentence (formula) to be a truth value in a given world. A truth-conditional approach

specifies the relationship which sometimes holds between *a sentence* and *the world*. 'The world' is intended to refer to the vast complex of things and situations that the sentences can be 'about.' A proposition is a *function* from a world-time pair to a truth value. The denotation that 'it is raining in NYC' in a certain world and time is true or false depending on the material circumstance. A proposition is a function that will tell us for all world-time pairs, whether the sentence is true or false.

Desiderata and Strategy: Why are 'Propositions' Important?

From the perspective offered here, the analysis of 'proposition' is important because propositions are what persons can think. There needs to be a theory of how propositions can be thoughts within our mental facilities in physicalist functional terms, and there needs to be a theory about our use of language which includes a theory of speaker reference. The concept of 'proposition' needs to be grounded among our mental representations with some kind of definition. We will explore what a 'proposition' should be conceived to be, in order to facilitate an informative theory of language. We are not trying to *discover* the nature of a proposition, but rather we search for a *precise stipulative explication* that allows us better understanding about the nature of natural and artificial languages. *This essay seeks to help the concept of 'proposition' escape from the bloated metaphysical ontology (and vocabulary) in which it has been historically trapped.*

In particular, with the postulation of propositions that are 'descriptions' (truth-apt) and propositions that are 'prescriptions' (not truth-apt) below, this will allow us to better understand the nature of various utterances as found in natural language. We will pursue an ordinary language 'conceptual analysis' of what a 'proposition' should be understood

to be. This analysis includes functional explanations and hypotheses about how language is used and the intentions of particular speakers. It is hypothesized here that beliefs are bearers of truth, and value statements are not truth-apt. There is no theoretical need for a stipulative notion of 'propositional attitude' (or 'attitude ascription'). At the conclusion of this essay, it is suggested that the recognition of prescriptive propositions might prove important to a noncognitive metaethics, as an alternative to expressivism.

Standard Accounts of Propositions

What are the standard accounts of 'proposition'? It is enough to just state the elementary and introductory accounts of 'proposition' to show their historical roots. Steven Luper (2004) states that:

As usually understood, a **proposition** is an abstract object; it is that which a declarative sentence expresses. For example, the words *Snow is white* express the proposition that snow is white, and the same proposition is expressed by the German equivalent of these words, namely, *Schnee ist weiss*. Propositions purport to describe the world, and true propositions do so accurately. Moreover, when you and I accept the same belief, we are linked to the same proposition through the relationship of belief (p. 1).

This abridged definition is found in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*:

A '**proposition**' is an abstract object to which a person is related by a belief, desire, or other psychological attitude, typically expressed in a language containing a psychological verb ('think,' 'deny,' 'doubt,' etc.) followed by a that-clause. The psychological states in question are called propositional attitudes.

Scott Soames (2015) similarly characterizes 'propositions' as follows:

'Propositions' are the "(i) the primary bearers of truth and falsity, (ii) the objects of belief, assertion, and other attitudes, (iii) the contents of perceptual and cognitive states, and (iv) the meanings of (some) sentences" (p. 9).¹

Are these explanations of what a 'proposition' is, on the right track? Is there an independent 'nature' (or precise definition) of what a proposition really is, as based upon metaphysical reality or semantic framework? Or is the concept of a proposition just a technical 'stipulation'? I argue 'proposition' is only definable as a technical stipulation.

Methodological Assumptions

(1) I will pursue a 'technically formalized' stipulated definition of 'proposition.' This form of definition is similar (or identical) to Rudolf Carnap's (1950) concept of an 'explication' where a *stipulated refinement* of an ordinary term (or imprecise concept) is proposed for articulating a more precise theory. Considerations about 'measurement' in a broad sense, are often involved in the stipulation of technically formalized definitions.

¹ For Soames, an account of 'proposition' is an ongoing research project. Metaphysicians typically seek an account about the 'nature' of propositions as a metaphysical-mathematical project. Jeffery C. King, Scott Soames, and Jeff Speaks, in *New Thinking About Propositions* (2014) admit that with their three different (competing) theories of 'proposition,' that they are *not* committed to an account of propositions that respects commonsense or folk intuitions (p. 2). Peter Hanks (2015) provides another complex theory about the nature of 'propositional content.' The concept of 'proposition' is deemed a technical semantic notion that only professional philosophers may understand.

(2) As a general methodology, I will pursue a 'conceptual analysis' of what a 'proposition' is. A conceptual analysis attempts to describe our linguistic practices and intentions and interpret various natural (and artificial) language *uses* of sentences and words. This analysis will include functional explanations and hypotheses about how language is used and the intentions of particular users. Functional explanations provide a theory of a person's reasons, assumptions, and goals for making an assertion. As a consequence, there will be no *deductive* argument offered here for why the final definition of 'proposition' proposed here should be adopted. Instead, the definition should be adopted because it best represents what a 'proposition' is, as an informative concept applicable to a philosophy of language which helps us explain our linguistic intuitions and beliefs within a consistent worldview.

(3) I will assume a theory of 'speaker reference' where it is *persons* that *refer* to various items using words. What a speaker's referent is, on occasion of use, depends upon the speaker's intentions. It is *persons* who use linguistic expressions to *refer* to various objects (or entities) in a context. It is *persons* who intend that their utterance to be asserted as 'truth-apt' or not. With a speaker theory, a *well-formed sentence* is the *basic unit of meaning*; *not* necessarily the words that it is built out of. Personal intentions and context allow a speaker (and audience) to identify the referents (and aboutness) of linguistic entities when asserted in context. While dominant formal theories of semantic reference theories explain (or eliminate) sentential ambiguity by using formal models of linguistic meaning, a speaker theory asks, 'What does *S mean* when asserting *p*?'

What is a Proposition? Are there Prescriptive Propositions?

With these methodological assumptions stated, we can return to our main problem. What is a proposition? It is standardly thought that 'propositions' as declarative sentences are *descriptive* in content and are either true or false. But are there, in addition, propositions that are *prescriptive* and not truth-apt? It is my hypothesis, elaborated elsewhere, that there is a basic distinction between 'descriptions' and 'prescriptions' where sentence meaning is determined by its use (i.e., function, motive) in a given context as intended by a speaker. I maintain that speakers are capable of asserting (i.e., declaring, saying, uttering, communicating) sentences that are intended to be either a 'description' or 'prescription' in a given context. I argue that there are two kinds of *speaker meaning* that sentences can have:

A '**description**' is an assertion that purports to express a correspondence (or a representation) of some state of affairs, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is *independent* of its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

A '**prescription**' is an assertion that purports to express a stipulation (or rule) upon a practice, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is *dependent* upon its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

Not all declarative sentences, when asserted in context, express truth or falsity, nor are they intended to. Prescriptions are meaningful declarative sentences but are not literally true or false. With a simple characterization, we start with an initial definition:

A '**proposition**' may be presented as a complete sentence, and when asserted in a context, it expresses the 'contents' of one's thought.

Let us examine twenty conceptual case studies to defend this simple definition. A central theme in these examples is that *sentences* aren't literally true or false; it is the *proposition* expressed (in a context) that is true or false. In the case of *sentences* that are expressed (in a context) as prescriptions, the acceptance of the *proposition* depends upon human agreement. Many of these cases (especially the initial ones), are familiar to philosophers:

(1) The sentence 'It is now raining' (as a linguistic expression) is not by itself literally true or false. The sentence needs to be asserted in an environment and at a certain time to be true or false. It is the *proposition* expressed (in a context) by the sentence 'It is now raining' that is true when it is raining, and false when it is not raining. Sentences are not literally true or false, but it is their assertion as a 'proposition' in a context that is either true or false.

(2) The English sentence 'Snow is white' expresses the same proposition as the German sentence 'Der Schnee ist weiss.' Given that these sentences are different, it isn't the linguistic entities (i.e., sentences of different language) that make the assertions true, it is the proposition (i.e., meaningful content) that is true.

(3) 'Sam is mad' and 'Sam is angry' are different sentences. 'Mad' and 'angry' are *synonyms*, so either sentence may be used in a context. The proposition is either true or false (about Sam) no matter which sentence is used.

(4) The sentences 'Here is the red book' and the 'The red book is here' when asserted in a context to a single book express the same proposition. It is not the sentences (which differ in *syntax*) that is literally true or false, it is the proposition expressed by a sentence that is true or false.

(5) The sentence 'My name is George' when asserted by different persons, may be true, even though the same sentence is used to express different propositions.

(6) The sentences 'Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*' and 'Samuel Clemens wrote *Huckleberry Finn*' are different sentences but express the same true proposition, because Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens. It isn't the sentences that are true, it is the *same* proposition (expressed by different sentences) that is true.²

(7) The sentence 'The present King of France is bald' expressed *two different propositions* when asserted (or used) during two consecutive time periods when Louis XIV and Louis XV continuously ruled. Each is contingently true or false.

(8) The proposition 'I am pale' is true or false, contingent upon the physical appearance of a person asserting the sentence as well as the referent of 'I.' When 'I' is understood as an indexical, the proposition stated is true or false depending on whom asserts the sentence and their physical circumstance (i.e., appearance). The sentence, 'I am pale,' is not true or false out of context.

(9) The sentences 'today was fun' and 'yesterday was fun' when stated on consecutive days, are used to express the same proposition.

² Another interpretation is that these sentences *don't* express the same proposition. Whether (or not) these sentences express the same content depends upon a person's background knowledge. If S doesn't know that the two proper names, 'Mark Twain' and 'Samuel Clemens' designate the same person (and are synonyms), these sentences will express two propositions (e.g., one proposition might be deemed true and the other false) for that S. For this uninformed S, these *sentences* express *different propositions*.

The following case studies introduce an intuitive distinction between ‘descriptive propositions’ and ‘prescriptive propositions.’

(10) The sentence 'Persons should not smoke tobacco' is understood by a metaethical cognitivist as a true or false proposition. For a non-cognitivist, this can be interpreted as a *prescriptive proposition* (not truth-apt).

(11) The sentences 'It is permissible to feed the wolves' and 'It is allowable to feed the wolves' (by synonymy of 'permissible' and 'allowable') may be interpreted as the same *prescriptive proposition* (not truth-apt).

(12) When S yells 'Ow!' she is implicitly *describing* herself as being in pain.

(13) An 'interrogative' (e.g., 'Do you know where a gas station is?') may be interpreted as the conjunction of a description and prescription: 'I do not know **x**' (*description*) and 'please tell me **x**' (*prescription*).

(14) With a 'warning' (e.g., 'Watch out!') a *prescription* is asserted, often accompanied by a *description* ('You'll get hit') about probable consequences of not heeding a warning.

(15) In 'bequeathing' to assert 'I give and bequeath my wristwatch to my brother, after I die' *describes* one's wishes and *prescribes* executors to abide by one's will.

(16) The concept of a 'promise' is to sincerely *describe* one's intention to do something, and to *prescribe* to oneself to perform appropriate follow-up actions.

(17) The 'solicitation of a bet' (e.g., 'I'll bet you \$25 that the Green Bay Packers will win') *describes* a bettor's willingness to bet money on his belief (prediction) about the outcome of a contest and *prescribes* to the listener to accept the wager.

(18) A 'request' (e.g., 'Would you please close the door?') is a *prescription* that a person should aid the speaker, and implicitly *describes* that the speaker desires (or has value) that the door be closed.

(19) Whether a sentence is being used to describe, prescribe, or both, is relative to a social context. For example, a cook at a restaurant may assert to a waiter that 'The sandwich is ready' which *describes* the completion of the food order and *prescribes* the pick-up of the order to be served to a patron.

(20) The assertion 'In order to turn off the lights you must flip the switch' is ambiguous without context. The speaker may be informing the listener about how to turn off the lights in a room (i.e., *describing*) or the speaker may be requesting the listener to turn off the lights (i.e., *prescribing*).

Again, a core idea behind these examples is that *sentences* in natural language (i.e., linguistic entities) are *not true or false*, but it is the *proposition*, that is expressed as *apt* for truth or falsity (or *not apt* for truth or falsity). Sentences-in-a-context that are intended as *descriptions* have truth values (i.e., **p** is true or false). Sentences-in-a-context, intended as *prescriptions*, express a stipulation (or rule) upon a practice, where the correctness (or incorrectness) of **p** is *dependent* upon its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons. A second version of 'proposition':

A '**proposition**' is a sentence that when asserted at a time and in a context, presents the 'content' (or 'significance') of one's thought. The 'content' of a proposition applies to contexts of speaker meaning. 'Propositional content' can be identified by ascriptions of a 'sameness in meaning' or a 'difference in meaning' to

the same sentence or different sentences in context. It is fluent speakers of a natural language that judge whether a sentence (expressed as a proposition in a context) has the same or a different literal meaning from other sentences.

What is allowed with this new definition, is that descriptive and prescriptive propositions, when asserted in context, normally have content, significance, or meaning for a speaker. From ordinary linguistic intuitions, the above case examples show that contrary to popular metaphysical belief, *propositions are not essentially true or false*.

Are Propositions the Objects of Propositional Attitudes?

A belief held among many philosophers of language is that persons have 'propositional attitudes' (i.e., psychological-mental attitude states) towards propositions. Michael Morris (2007) defines a 'propositional attitude' as follows:

A '**propositional attitude**' is a psychological state which can be described by means of a 'that' clause ('She hopes that he will drown,' 'He thinks that his horse will win,' etc.). The term derives from a particular theory of what these states involve, namely an *attitude* (expressed by a psychological verb like 'hope,' 'think,' 'wish,' 'fear,' etc. towards a *proposition* (what is meant by a declarative sentence—expressed by a 'that'-clause). (p. 314).

Nathan Salmon and Scott Soames (1988) state that “Propositions are the sorts of things that are true or false... Propositions are what we believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment about. When you fear that you will fail or hope that you will succeed, when you venture a guess or feel certain about something, the object of your attitude is a proposition. That

is what propositions are" (p. 1). 'Propositional attitudes' account for a person's psychological state towards a proposition:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (1) S believes that p. | S disbelieves that p. |
| (2) S is certain that p. | S is unsure that p. |
| (3) S assumes that p. | S doubts that p. |
| (4) S wonders if p. | S knows that p. |
| (5) S desires (or wishes) that p. | S dislikes (or has aversion) that p. |
| (6) S hopes that p. | S fears that p. |
| (7) S is proud that p. | S is embarrassed that p. |
| (8) S values p. | S disvalues p. |

To reiterate, with propositional attitude reports, 'propositions' are defined as referents of 'that'-clauses. A proposition is whatever the that-clause refers to or denotes. A proposition **p** is understood as the 'content' of a belief, desire, value, and so on, and the 'referent' of S's attitude. Jesper Kallestrup (2012) states:

To say that Anna *believes* that apples are wholesome is to say that Anna bears the *attitude of belief* towards the proposition that apples are wholesome. *Propositions* are *abstract entities* to which one can be belief related. They are composed of concepts and are capable of being true or false (pp. 1-2, italics added).

David Shier (2012) states that 'propositional attitude reports' (i.e., sentences reporting the propositional attitudes of individuals) are "central to our psychological discourse and to our understanding of the world, since in order to explain and predict behavior, we must appeal to information about the beliefs, desires, etc. of ourselves and others" (p. 795).

This so-called relational analysis implies that 'S believes that **p**' is true if and only if **S** stands in the relation of believing with a certain abstract object (i.e., the proposition **p**), and similarly 'S desires that **p**' is true if and only if **S** stands in the relation of desiring to a certain proposition **p**.

Do We Have 'Attitudes' Towards Propositions?

But do persons really have 'attitudes' toward propositions? Five examples:

p1= 'Apples are wholesome.'

p2= 'Human-generated warming of Earth is presently occurring.'

p3= 'I'm going to the store to get groceries.'

p4= 'Abortion should be legal (with restrictions).'

p5= 'This sunset is gorgeous.'

Does my belief or disbelief toward **p1** and **p2** express a *relationship* (or an *attitude*) to that **p** (e.g., apples are wholesome, the earth is warming)? Does my proposal of an upcoming action express a relationship of desire or action toward **p** (e.g., going to a grocery store)? Does my value of (or disvalue) toward **p** (abortion should be legal) express an attitude relationship to that **p** (abortion should be legal)? Does my value of (or disvalue) of **p** (the sunset) express my attitude ascription to that **p** (the appearance of the sun at a moment)? In general, do persons in expressing their beliefs, desires, and values, have '*attitudes*' towards a 'proposition'?

The critical response asserted here is that persons *do not* have *relations* (or '*attitudes*') toward propositions as the 'objects' of belief, desire, value, etc. Beliefs, values, and other attitude verbs aren't about a 'something.' This verbiage and its

associated distinctions are fueled by possible world metaphysics, formal semantics, and stipulative definitions. Morris's fixed definiens definition, that a *propositional attitude* is a psychological state which can be described by means of a 'that' clause,' is pure stipulation. The response advanced here with emphasis on speaker reference, denies the worldview favoring the measurement of the notion of proposition, as a part of a postulation of 'linguistic reference' for terms and sentences. Semantics is misguided.

John Lyons (1995), a practitioner of formal semantics, states that it is generally agreed that words, phrases, and sentences have meaning, that sentences are composed of words (and phrases), and that the meaning of a sentence is the product of the words (and phrases) of which is composed (p. 46). Language is primarily used to convey facts about the world. Alan Cruse (2011) says that linguists typically take the existence of meaning for granted and accept it as an intuitively accessible natural kind. All semanticists are to some extent looking for regularities and a system in the way meanings behave, as this leads to maximally economical descriptions. They attempt to model the semantic behavior of natural language expressions by means of a strict logical or quasi-mathematical formalism (p. 16). Formal semantics is *not* concerned with speaker-meaning, non-truth functional sentences, nor non-declarative sentences. Lyons states that "non-descriptive meaning is more heterogeneous and, in the view of many philosophers and linguists, less central. It includes an expressive component (more or less equivalent terms are 'affective,' 'attitudinal,' and 'emotive.')

Expressive meaning—i.e., the kind of meaning by virtue of which speakers express, rather than describe, their beliefs, attitudes, and feelings—is often held to fall within the scope of stylistics or pragmatics" (p. 44).

But should formal theories and models of ‘linguistic reference’ take precedence over a ‘speaker meaning’ account of what a ‘proposition’ is? Why should a ‘proposition’ be studied (and defined) as an entity within a formal system of linguistic reference, similar to the technical definition of ‘intension’?³ From the case studies above, it is more plausible and physically consistent with empirical evidence and everyday thought, that persons believe **p** (with degrees of certainty), desire (or aversion) **p**, value (or disvalue) **p**, and will intend **p**, as the content of existing non-relational functional (mental) states. There are no ‘attitudes’ about propositions.⁴ In support of this position, a number of definitions, consistent with a physicalist philosophy of mind, should be adopted:

A '**belief**' is a functional mental state involving affirming, doubting, or suspending judgment about a propositional assertion. Beliefs function to represent the world. **S** believes a **p** as an existing (but changeable) mental state.

A '**desire**' is a functional brain state that is a primitive psychological, emotional, or hormonal state that motivates many of our actions.

³ An 'intension' is the meaning or connotation of an expression, as opposed to its extension or denotation, which consists of those things specified by the expression. (Source: *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*).

⁴ Expressivist semantic metaethical theories claim that ethical assertions are expressions of 'evaluative attitudes' and express non-representational 'states of mind.' Expressivism claims that words like 'ought' or 'wrong' function to express non-cognitive attitudes. The function of these attitudes is not to describe how the world *is*, but how it *should* be. These noncognitive attitudes *explain* these words meaning. See Elisabeth Camp (2018).

A '**value**' is a functional physical brain state that measures the worth or importance of certain physical objects, events or actions. Assertions of value are the product of a person's desires, feelings, interests, beliefs, and other values in a social environment. A person possesses a value but doesn't have an attitude toward it. Beliefs, desires, and values lead us to action.

An '**intention to act**' is a determination to behave in a certain way. Not only do intentions (as functional physical brain states) often manifest themselves in overt actions; the 'intention to communicate' using language (i.e., to express one's thoughts) may be termed a 'speech act.'

Any proposition about the contents of S's beliefs, desires, values, and intentions are *attributes* (i.e., properties) of S's existing *functional mental state*. The propositional 'content' or 'attitude' as held by S is not a relationship from S to an abstract proposition.

Finally, let's observe three false conceptions about 'propositions':

(1) Propositions have a 'metaphysical nature.' Loux (2006) characterizes a 'proposition' as a 'special category' of entities that:

...constitute the objects of acts of asserting and denying and acts of thinking. Although it is only a contingent fact about one of these entities that it actually gets asserted or thought, it is a necessary truth that each proposition be something that is assertible or thinkable. Realists characterize these special entities as abstract entities that exist eternally and necessarily. They claim what they call propositions are intersubjectively available and, hence, constitute the materials for the public communication of a shared conception of the world (p. 129).

Loux states that propositions are the primary bearers of truth and falsehood and are the things that enter into the various logical relations. These entities are the referents of that-clauses. A proposition is a unique representation of the world.

Among the metaphysical claims found in the literature, similar or equivalent to the above: (a) A proposition is an abstract object explained in terms of a set of truth conditions. (b) Possible worlds can be constructed out of propositions. Propositions are structured sets of propositional worlds. (c) Propositions possess modal attributes. (d) A proposition is a structure that represents a recursive procedure for determining a set of truth conditions. (e) Propositions are the semantic values of expressions that occur in a variety of constructions (and are quantifiable over). (f) Possible worlds can be constructed out of propositions. (g) Propositions are structured sets of possible worlds. (h) Propositions possess modal properties of being impossible, possible, and necessary.

Response: Many theorists studying 'propositions' are strong advocates of metaphysical realism and the investigation of abstract logical structures. The viability of metaphysical realism, despite its contemporary popularity, can be questioned.

(2) Propositions are the *information* that sentences encode relative to context.

In other words, different sentences may encode the same information. Soames (2015) states that "Up to now, theorists have identified the semantic content of a sentence with information that represents the world being a certain way, but they haven't yet given a plausible story about what such a piece of information is, whether linguistically encoded or not. This is our most urgent task, and the one on which I will concentrate most" (p. 9).

Response: The popular idea that semantic content, perceptual content, and other thought processes are a mechanistic input of non-interpreted 'information' is similar to the discredited idea that there is a 'given' perceptual environment that is free from interpretation. Sentences don't encode information. The concept of information has no place in explaining propositions or concepts. Jerry Fodor's theory of *Concepts* (1998) as 'informational atomism' isn't interesting (or informative). Fred Dretske's *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (1981) is a failed theory. Dretske uses the terms 'information' and 'inform' to talk only of representation and facts, but false and dubious propositions can obviously be presented as 'factual input.' Further, the information that **S** infers from **p** is a function of **S**'s background beliefs and worldview. Any theory about propositions that involves the vague concept of 'information' can be dismissed as irrelevant.

(3) Propositions are *structured entities with individuals, properties, and relations as constituents.* Compositional semantics assigns functions to each syntactic unit, so that well-formed sentences are assigned propositions—construed as functions from worlds (or 'circumstances') to truth-values. Furthermore, accounts of belief, knowledge, and metaphysical necessity typically assume that these operators all operate on propositions. Like well-formed sentences, *propositions* are *compositional* in character.

Response: Sentences, propositions, and symbols can have 'speaker meaning' without implicit (or explicit) attention to, or knowledge of, or existence of, a compositional structure. A sentence or proposition can have a discernible 'meaning' (in context) for a person, with the presentation of a *simple symbol*. Some propositions (both descriptive and prescriptive) are expressible as unified (i.e., non-structured) symbols.

Consider 'simple symbols,' such as the symbols involved in common road signs. A curved arrow is a simple symbol that represents an existing curve in the road ahead (i.e., a description). A road sign with the image of a walking person with a circle and diagonal cross over the image, indicates that one shouldn't walk at that location (i.e., a prescription). Similarly, a car parking lot attendant when using various hand gestures (e.g., pointing with a finger or moving both hands in a downward direction upon a space) to signal where a driver should park, represents the proposition 'park here.' The *content* of the person's hand symbols implies the prescriptive proposition 'park here.' Propositions and propositional symbols (e.g., curve ahead, don't walk, park here) when presented graphically by signs or gestures, may not have structured compositional constituents. A metaphysical explanation of what a proposition is, in terms of individuals, properties, and relations, is extravagant, uninformative, and unneeded.

Conclusion

On the basis of the conceptual analysis presented here, a proposition is *not* some metaphysical abstract object; its definition is predicated upon our linguistic intuitions about its core use and fruitfulness for explanation. A final definition of 'proposition':

A '**proposition**' is a sentence (or symbol) that when asserted (or displayed) at a time and in a context, presents the 'content' of human thought. The 'content' (or 'significance,' 'meaning') being a 'primitive' term where the *content* is attributable to *speaker meaning* (i.e., interpretation, significance). Different sentences (and symbols) may express the same proposition. The same sentence (as a linguistic entity) may be used in different contexts to express different propositions.

Both *descriptive* and *prescriptive* propositions, asserted in context, normally have content, significance, or meaning for a speaker.⁵

Of course, this essay alone will not alter the definition of 'proposition' as it is presented above in *The Cambridge Dictionary*. As a dictionary, it *reports* the standard use of the term (and associated concepts). Instead, a substantial number of philosophers are needed to adopt this worldview about propositions to merit its mention in the entry.

In the final paragraph of the entry for 'proposition' in *The Cambridge Dictionary*, contributor Steven J. Wegner states that a “satisfactory doctrine of propositions remains elusive.” (p. 754). The debate about what 'propositions' are continues to this day. It is maintained here that this stagnation is the sad consequence of metaphysical realism and its bloated vocabulary. There is hope though. Using a ‘conceptual analysis’ methodology the above definition of ‘proposition’ proves theoretically fruitful to many philosophical issues. For example, a speaker reference non-cognitivist can be interpreted as asserting a prescriptive proposition. A ‘metaethical prescriptivist’ position can be detailed to rival non-cognitive theories of expressivism. This is quite important. It allows us to avoid (uninteresting) semantic model complexities for explaining moral word meanings.

⁵ This notion of ‘content’ in this proposed definition, contrasts with David Kaplan (1989) when he talks about the ‘content’ of a sentence and an expression. On his view, the content of a sentence, S, in a language, L, relative to a context, C, is found by taking the semantic values of parts of S and combining them in accordance with the semantic and syntactic composition rules of L.

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