

Propositions, Representations and Pluri-Propositionalism

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Abstract

A frequent criticism of Richard Vallee’s “pluri-propositionalism” is that it multiplies propositions beyond necessity. I argue that this criticism, recently voiced by Robert Stanton and Arthur Sullivan, is based in misconceptions about propositions are and how they help us classify utterances and the mental states and events that lead to them, relying for the most part on extended discussions of examples.

Keywords

cognitive significance; pluri-propositionalism; proposition; representations; singular terms

1 Introduction

In their illuminating review of Richard Vallée’s *Words and Contents* (2018), Robert Stainton and Arthur Sullivan find a difficulty with his pluri-propositionalism (2021), basically that it multiplies propositions beyond necessity. I think their worries reflect a reservation many have about pluriprospositionalism. I won’t deal in any detail with most of Stainton and Sullivan’s arguments, which make subtle points about a wide range of issues. I focus on what I take to be the basic worry about multiplying propositions beyond necessity and try to defuse it. I claim the worry is rooted in misconceptions about what propositions are and how they help us classify states and episodes of mind and the utterances to which they lead.

In this paper I present an example that poses an apparent problem for a widely held view I’ll call “referentialism”. According to referentialism an utterance of a sentence containing

singular terms such as proper names, indexicals, and demonstratives expresses a singular proposition that is true iff the object(s) referred to have the property or stand in the relation predicated of them. So “Joe Biden is a democrat” and “That man is a democrat” said with an indication of Biden, and “I am democrat” said by Biden and “You are a democrat” said by Jill Biden to Joe, all express the same singular proposition, that Biden has the property of being a democrat.

This seems to raise Frege’s problem of cognitive significance (Frege 1967: 138). “Hesperus has no moons” and “Phosphorus has no moons” express the same singular proposition. But one could believe that an utterance of the first is true, while an utterance of the second is false. Frege’s theory of sense and reference deals with this. Although they have the same reference, the planet Venus, “Phosphorus” and “Hesperus” have different senses, that is, conditions an object needs to fulfil to be their reference: being the first planet to appear in the evening for “Hesperus” and being the last planet to disappear in the morning for “Phosphorus”. The sentences do not express singular propositions about Venus, but qualitative or general propositions.¹ Instead of one singular proposition with Venus as a constituent, we have two general propositions containing different senses—basically complex properties – that have Venus as their reference.

This problem led Frege to give up a view he held in his early book, *Begriffsschrift*, that, interpreted somewhat anachronistically, amounted to accepting singular propositions.² For much of the twentieth century this seemed to many philosophers of language the right course to take. But in the sixties and seventies Kripke, Donnellan, Kaplan and others convinced many of us that proper names and indexicals simply don’t work that way. In Kaplan’s terminology, they are “directly referential”, by which he merely means that no Fregean sense is involved.³ Hence the re-emergence of singular propositions, and also of Frege’s problem of cognitive significance.

In the first part of this essay I explain how Vallée’s account solves these problems. In the second part I consider the problem of multiplying propositions beyond necessity, in the

¹ Frege’s example is “The Evening Star is a planet with a shorter period of revolution than the Earth,” and “The Morning Star is a planet with a shorter period of revolution than the earth.” It became standard in the literature to use “Hesperus” and “Phosphorus” and I’ve simplified the example.

² See Perry 2019, *passim*.

³ Which doesn’t make them very direct in the usual sense of the word. When I say “Aristotle was a bright guy,” my utterance of “Aristotle” refers to the Greek philosopher who lives a couple of thousand years ago, in virtue of a casual historical chain involving several languages and innumerable people and books.

context of a discussion about the concept(s) of a proposition. To help keep issues separate, however, I shall avoid the term “proposition” when describing Vallée’s account in the first part.

2 An example

Alice and Bill are at a bar. Alice’s old friend Clara walks up and greets her. Two scenarios. In the first Alice says to Bill, at that time, which I’ll call *t*, nodding towards Clara, “Clara lives in Toledo”. In the second she says, at the same time, nodding towards Clara, “She lives in Toledo.” In both scenarios, Bob learns that Clara, to whom Alice nods, lives in Toledo. No problem. That’s what she said. But in the first he also learns that she has the name “Clara”. How did he learn that?

According to referentialism, in both scenarios Alice says the same thing, for she expresses the same singular proposition. I’ll use *C* to refer to Clara in this essay. What Alice says is

That *C* lives in Toledo at *t*.

Since I am going to ignore tense in this essay, we can simply say,

(1) That *C* lives in Toledo

I use the phrase “subject-matter of an utterance” for the objects and properties referred to by the expressions in a sentence. The subject-matter of Clara’s utterance:

(*u*–1) Clara lives in Toledo

includes Clara and the relation of being an old friend, but not the name “Clara”.

The truth of (1) puts no conditions on the name “Clara”. That Clara is named “Clara” is not part of what Alice said. And yet, by understanding what she said, Bill learns that “Clara” is a name of Clara. How did that happen?

3 A solution

It seems like this question should have a pretty straightforward solution; it’s sort of obvious what happened. For those who follow Richard Vallée’s advice in *Words and Contents* 2018

this problem does have a straightforward solution; it's basically just a matter of common sense, which, of course, virtually insures it will be philosophically controversial.⁴

English and similar languages give us two standard ways to report Alice's utterance, direct and indirect discourse: "Alice said 'Clara is from Toledo'" and Alice said that Clara is from Toledo. Vallée says this isn't all the philosopher needs, and gives us some additional tools.

First of all, Bill grasps something about the utterance he hears, simply in virtue of perceiving it, recognizing that Alice is speaking English, recognizing the grammar of her sentence, and recognizing the words she is using he grasps that **(u-1)** is true iff

- (2) That the person "Clara" refers to in **(u-1)** has the relation "lives in" refers to in **(u-1)** to the entity "Toledo" refers to in **(u-1)**.

Bill isn't a linguist or a philosopher of language; he wouldn't say or think something like (2) if asked to describe what he realized about the utterance he heard. So I'll say "grasps" instead of "knows". He understands how English works; he is *attuned* to facts like (2).

In the context of **(u-1)**, Alice is looking at and nodding towards C, so it's obvious to Bill that she is referring to her. That is, he grasps that Alice is referring to C with the name "Clara". Bill is attuned to the fact that when we use a proper name to refer to a person, it is normally that person's name. Conditions are quite normal. So he infers that "Clara" is the name of C. Problem solved. So, given (2), and the context, and the obvious, what else has to be the case for (1) to be true?

- (3) That C has the relation "lives in" refers to in **((u-1))** to the entity "Toledo" refers to in **(u-1)**.

This is all happening in California. Bill infers from this aspect of the context and common sense that the city Alice refers to with "Toledo" is Toledo, Ohio. If she had been referring to Toledo, Spain she probably would have said so. Adding this to what is given, what else has to be the case for **(u-1)** to be true?

- (4) That C has the relation "lives in" refers to in **(u-1)** to Toledo, Ohio.

⁴ The *pluri-propositionalist* framework that Vallée adopts stems in part from the theory I introduced in *Reference and Reflexivity* 2012 [2001] and Kepa Korta and I developed in *Critical Pragmatics* 2011. The terminology I used there and Vallée's are slightly different, and differ from other terminologies that those who like the framework have adopted. I'll explain the terminology I use in this essay as I introduce it.

Noting that “lives in” refers to a relation between a person and a city, Bill infers that it simply refers to the relation between a person and the place where they reside. Adding this to what is given what else has to be the case for **(u-1)** to be true? Using “lives in” in the same way as Alice does:

(5) That C lives in Toledo (Ohio).

Note that (2) and (3) and (4) all put conditions on the utterance **(u-1)** itself. We can call them *reflexive* truth-conditions. But (5) only puts conditions on the subject matter of **(u-1)**, the object and properties referred to. So we can call (4) the *subject-matter* or the *referential* truth-conditions of **(u-1)**. (3) and (4) put conditions on **(u-1)** and some of the referents, so we can call them *hybrid* truth-conditions.

Bill gets up and is clearly heading in the direction of the bar. Clara says with her eyebrows raised and in a certain rise in tone that make it clear that she is making a request, not an assertion, “I’ll have a mojito.” This utterance has compliance-conditions rather than truth-conditions.⁵ It has reflexive compliance-conditions; the request will be satisfied if Bill brings the referent of “I” a drink of the type “mojito” refers to. He grasps those. He knows that Clara is the speaker, so he also grasps the hybrid compliance-conditions: that someone brings Clara a drink of the type “mojito” refers to. Bill has no idea what type of drink that is, but he doesn’t need to. He goes to the bar and says, “Give me a mojito”. He watches the bartender mix white rum, lime juice, sugar, mint, ice, and sparkling water, learns what a mojito is; only at that point does he fully grasp the referential satisfaction-conditions of Clara’s request.

So the sort of account Vallée employs is not limited to getting at the truth-conditions of assertions; it applies to the satisfaction-conditions of requests and other expressions of desire, the compliance conditions of orders, and so forth. Avoiding the word “proposition” for now, I’ll call all of these *contents*.

So, to sum up, on Vallée’s account utterances have contents, but these are not limited to their referential contents. They also include reflexive and hybrid contents. These are not what the speaker says, at least not normally, but they are contents that can be used in explaining what listeners glean from utterances, and also, although I have not emphasized that here, the motivations speakers have for saying what they do in the way that they do.

⁵ Of course, you could also embrace Searle’s (1975) theory of indirect speech acts, and assume that the speaker simultaneously makes directly an assertion (with truth-conditions) and indirectly a request (with satisfaction-conditions), but I will leave those complications aside.

Now consider Frege's original worry, identity statements. Alice says to Clara, "This city is Santa Rosa." The referential content is the same as if she had said "Santa Rosa is Santa Rosa" or "This city is this city". But what she intended to convey was not the referential content, but most likely, in this context, the hybrid content that "Santa Rosa" refers to this city. So the various reflexive and hybrid contents available are sometimes what the speaker intends to convey, what we would ordinarily consider "what is said".

So Vallée's account gives us a rich set of tools for analyzing what is going on when someone makes an utterance, and what information can be gleaned from the utterance, or what beliefs might motivate it, in addition to the subject-matter content. Is Vallée's account referentialist? I said earlier:

According to referentialism an utterance of a sentence containing singular terms such as proper names, indexicals, and demonstratives expresses a singular proposition that is true iff the object(s) referred to have the property or stand in the relation predicated of them.

Vallée need not give any of this up. His account does not deny referential content, or demean it in any way. It simply adds additional contents—truth-conditions, satisfaction-conditions, and so forth—that any referentialist should recognize. In Perry 2001 this is called "Critical Referentialism".

4 A difficulty

A difficulty that Stainton and Sullivan raise in their review is: "[o]n [Vallée's] framework, *all* contents of *utterances* must be propositional. ... [F]or every challenge, additional propositions are the solution" (2021: 6).

The worry, on my interpretation, is that on the pluri-propositionalist account all contents turn out to be propositions. This may work for statements, but it shouldn't be over-generalized. Questions, for example, aren't statements, and don't seem to have propositional contents. If I ask "Who lives in the White House?" a proposition doesn't get at the content of my utterance. *I didn't state that so and so*, I asked *who so and so?*. We shouldn't treat all cognitive states as attitudes towards propositions. If I say, "I want to eat Caesar salad for lunch" I'm expressing a desire, not a belief. There is content, but no that-clause, just an infinitive. The question is not whether a belief is true or false, but whether a desire is fulfilled or not. I'm expressing a desire, not making a statement.

This is a reasonable worry, but I think the problem is not Vallée's account, but the word "proposition". If we think in terms of "contents" as I used the term in the last section, the

worry disappears.

5 Propositions and representations

I think that Sullivan and Stainton are quite right; historically and in ordinary English the term “proposition” is closely tied to statements and assertions, which fits what Stainton and Sullivan say. My Apple Dictionary defines “proposition”: “A proposition is a statement expressing something that is either true or false”.

Most dictionaries have something like this as the main definition, perhaps using “assertion” rather than “statement”.

This is the first entry on a page of the dictionary called “Proposition (disambiguation)”. A number of other entries follow, but none of them fit comfortably all the cases of “propositions” that the pluri-propositionalist finds. My Apple dictionary gives a pretty standard definition:

In logic and linguistics, a proposition is the meaning of a declarative sentence. In philosophy, “meaning” is understood to be a non-linguistic entity which is shared by all sentences with the same meaning.^[1] Equivalently, a proposition is the non-linguistic bearer of truth or falsity which makes any sentence that expresses it either true or false.

Outside of logic, linguistics and philosophy, propositions are often concrete events of speaking, or the sentences used in them; they are concrete events of asserting things, and things like notes and contracts that result from these sayings. Logicians, linguists and philosophers co-opted the term “proposition” and gave it a somewhat special use. I think that, at least while doing philosophy, we should stick to our use of the stolen term.

Propositions, as I use the term and recommend that others use it, at least while doing the philosophy of language, are quite different things than representations. Our thoughts and utterances are episodes I call “representings”. They have causes and effects. Representings produce representations: physical phenomena that can be perceived by others, miles away and centuries later that they were produced, and so continue to have effects. Representing and representations are part of what Gottlob Frege called “the causal realms”—the mental and physical (Frege 1918, 1956). Utterances are the results of the thoughts that motivate making them, and produce representations that are usually intended to cause further events. These representations may be sounds that travel through the air. They may be patterns of light caused by motions of hands and arms, using sign language. They may be marks on

paper, to be stuck on doors, erected as signs, or sent through the mail. They may be states of a computer that can be caused by typing, and via networks cause other computers around the office or around the world to produce the same words on their screens (Levy & Olson 1992).

On the other hand, propositions, as most contemporary philosophers of language use the term while at work, are abstract objects of some sort or another that are designed to systematically encode conditions of truth, satisfaction, and so forth of sentences and utterances of them.

I suspect the philosophical use began when Russell used the “proposition” to translate Frege’s term “*Gedanke*”. The natural translation would be “thought”. But thoughts are mental events or states, and that’s not at all what Frege had in mind. I’ll use “Thought” for what he had in mind. Frege took *Gedanken* or Thoughts to be eternal unchanging denizens of a Third Realm, in addition to the two causal realms, the mental and physical (1918, 1956). On Frege’s view, Thoughts are what we are reported to believe when we say things of the form: “X believes that S.” ‘That S’ refers to a Thought, and so believing is a relation between a believer and a Thought, that is, between a person with a body and mind, a solid citizen of the causal realms, and the proposition that S, an eternal unchanging denizen of the eternal realm.

Frege emphasized that ordinary *thoughts*, in contrast with *Thoughts*, are part of the mental realm. Russell thought this was all pretty confusing, and co-opted ‘proposition’ for what Frege was getting at with ‘Thought’. (Which is not to say that Russell completely shared Frege’s view of propositions.) That’s now the dominant use of ‘proposition’ in philosophy of language, although not at all in English generally. Russell also seems to have introduced or at least popularized the phrase *propositional attitude*.⁶ What kind of attitudes are these? Attitudes are literally ways of thinking or feeling about someone or something. We can have attitudes towards abstract objects; perhaps seven is your favorite number. Are propositional attitudes like that?

It doesn’t seem that way to me. I think this term derives from Frege’s picture. Humans, immersed in the causal realms, come into relations with abstract objects. These eternally existing abstract objects have properties that mental states and activities and the language we use to conduct them inherit, like truth-conditions and for that matter truth and falsity. Much as I admire Frege, this seems to have things sort of backwards.

I think propositions are abstract objects that encode conditions on objects and proper-

⁶ See, for example, Russell (1919: 30ff).

ties. These conditions may be the truth-conditions of assertions or beliefs, the satisfaction conditions of wants and desires, the compliance conditions of orders and requests, and many other things. I'll call them all 'success conditions'. But surely utterances and mental states don't have these success conditions in virtue of being related to propositions, but in virtue of the nature and circumstances of the episodes and states in question. On causal theories of mind like Armstrong and Lewis gave us, mental states have causal roles which connect them systematically via perception and action to states and changes in the world. Our "folk-theory" of the mind classifies our beliefs, desires, intentions and actions basically in terms of their causal roles, and terms like "belief" and "desire" and "intention" get at the theoretical concepts introduced by this theory, which has been and remains very useful for most of us, who don't know much about brains and such things.

Part of the folk-theory is that beliefs have truth-conditions, desires have satisfaction conditions, intentions and actions have success conditions and so forth. Presumably rather late in the development of this theory abstract objects were developed to help philosophers, linguists and logicians and others to systematically keep track of this. This induces a relation between events and states in the causal realm and the abstract propositions that encode their success-conditions. But propositions, in this sense, are assigned truth and success-conditions in virtue of the causal roles beliefs, desires, and intentions that they are used to keep track of, not the other way around.

On this view, to have a propositional attitude towards a proposition P is paradigmatically to be in a mental state with success conditions of some sort, where P encodes those success conditions. So "Sam believes that Portland is in Oregon" tells us that Sam has a belief with this relation to the proposition that Portland is in Oregon. Sam says that Portland is in Oregon tells us that Sam has the saying relation to that proposition. "Sam wants to visit Portland" tells us that Sam has the desire relation to the proposition that he visits Oregon.

We certainly have such relations to the propositions that express the truth-conditions of our beliefs and statements and the satisfaction conditions of our desires. But having beliefs and desires and making statements does not *consist* in having such relations. To use the phrase "propositional attitude" for both the picture Frege had, where the relation events in the causal realm has to immaterial Thoughts *constitutes* their having the content they have, and the picture the causal theory provides, is very confusing. On the latter view, as most contemporary alternatives, the mental state or the utterance expressing it will not be *about* the proposition. Rather, the proposition will be an abstract object constructed from the objects and properties the representations are about, the ones they contains information about and lead to act upon. It won't involve attitudes, in the ordinary sense, towards the proposition.

6 Propositions

Given that propositions are abstract objects, simply seeing them as sets, perhaps sequences of properties and objects, makes them seem a bit less mystical than seeing them as denizens of an eternal Third Realm, at least to those who find sets a bit less mysterious than realms of all sorts of eternal objects. But what kind of sets?

I am pretty sure that propositions are *not* sets of Lewisian possible worlds. David Lewis (1986) thought that there is an infinity of concrete worlds, as real as our own, which we don't happen to inhabit. And he thought that anything that is possible in our world actually happens in one of them. I see no reason to believe either of these things. On Lewis's view a proposition is a function from worlds to truth and falsity, and so can be identified with the set of worlds for which they deliver truth. But propositions can't be sets of Lewisian worlds, for there aren't any. If that were the only alternative, I'd stick with Frege.

The terms 'possible world' is also used, basically following Saul Kripke (1963), for functions like the models of logical theory, that take the non-logical expressions of some language and assign extensions to them, and so truth-values to the sentences of the language. Kripke's possible worlds leave the meanings of the expressions intact. The functions don't tell us which sentences would be true if the meanings were different, but which would be true, given their meanings, if the world were different. So conceived, possible worlds are, as Robert Stalnaker puts it in *Inquiry* 1984 formal or functional *tools*, bits of philosophical apparatus, rather than discoveries of a metaphysical theory. These bits of philosophical apparatus have given us modal logic, so who can complain about them? If we want to employ possible worlds, I think this is the way to go. But I think there is a more intuitive approach to propositions for those, like me, who are perfectly happy with properties and relations.

Such Propositions are to be sequences of, and sets of sequences of, properties and suitable objects, basically what Jon Barwise and I called "states of affairs" in *Situations and Attitudes*. David Armstrong in *A World of States of Affairs* 1997 and elsewhere provides a well-worked out account of states of affairs and explains their value in metaphysics and epistemology. This requires a realistic attitude towards properties.

There are many variations on this basic idea. Details won't matter for this essay. The point is that, given properties and objects, propositions can be regarded as or modelled as set-theoretical entities built from them, no more dubious than any other abstract objects regularly appealed to in science, logic, mathematics, and philosophy. So conceived, there is

no shortage of propositions.

But, to repeat myself, the sets identified with propositions have no *intrinsic* truth or success-conditions, as Fregean Thoughts were supposed to have. The sequences we consider to be propositions acquire their success-conditions when they are systematically coordinated with and given the job of classifying representations that already have success-conditions. Consider the sequence: <Live-in,<2021, Jill Biden, Joseph Biden, the White House>>. We can give this set the job of encoding in an abstract object the truth conditions of the statement "Jill Biden and Joseph Biden live in the White House in 2021" as part of a systematic mapping of statements into such sequences. Since the set is assigned to true statements, it inherits their truth-value. It would be a bit perverse, but feasible, to assign that proposition to 'Jill Biden and Joseph Biden do not live in the White House in 2021,' so the proposition is true, and carry this out systematically. <Not-in,<Detroit, Michigan>> would encode the true statement that Detroit is in Michigan. The point is that there is nothing intrinsic to these sets that prevents us from adopting this perverse system.

So Vallée's use of the term "proposition" and the term "pluri-propositionalism" encourage incorporating various confusions associated with the word "proposition" into his view, although they are not or need not be a part of it. Maybe "content" and "pluricontentism" (or, perhaps, "content-pluralism" would serve his purposes better.

7 Conclusion

The pluri-propositionalist framework basically involves recognizing (a) That there are more contents involved in understanding expressions of belief, desire, and the like than are explicitly recognized in direct and indirect discourse; (b) These properties are useful in explaining many phenomena that are mysterious if we restrict ourselves to the contents reported in direct and indirect discourse; (c) We can employ our familiar semantical concepts of meaning, reference, and truth to connect propositions with utterances and the mental states they express to classify these, giving referential contents an honored place, but not supposing they are all we need.

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