

Teaching & Learning Guide for: Act-Type Theories of Propositions

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This guide accompanies the following article(s):

Act-Type Theories of Propositions, *Philosophy Compass* 16/11 (2021)
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Author's Introduction

Many philosophers believe that there are *propositions*: abstract objects which are true or false, which are the contents of sentences, and which can be believed and asserted. Propositions are supposed to play several roles in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and metaphysics. One recent proposal is that propositions are types of act of predication. This entry presents the main idea of this proposal, some of the ways that it can be developed, and discusses some criticisms.

Author Recommends

**Hanks, P. W. (2015). *Propositional content*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199684892.001.0001>**

Soames, S. (2015). *Rethinking language, mind, and meaning*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt21668hs>

Hanks and Soames are the most prominent defenders of act-type theories of propositions.

**King, J. C., Soames, S., & Speaks, J. (2014). *New thinking about propositions*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199693764.001.0001>**

As well as Soames' presentation of the act-type theory, this contains interesting discussions of several alternative theories of propositions as well as useful background on the topic.

Online Materials

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy has several useful entries:

- <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/prop-attitude-reports/>
- <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/propositions/>
- <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/propositions-structured/>
- <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/propositions-singular/>

Peter Hanks' post on the Oxford University Press blog describes some of the background to his work in *Propositional content*, and Friederike Moltmann's does the same for her edited collection on the act-type theory (with Mark Textor):

- <https://blog.oup.com/2015/06/bertrand-russell-suicide/>
- <https://blog.oup.com/2017/07/hope-predict-philosophy/>

Jeffrey C. King's piece in *Oxford Handbooks Online* surveys recent work on the metaphysics of propositions:

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935314.013.26>

Sample Syllabus

This is a five week unit introducing the contemporary debate about propositions, structured around *New thinking about propositions*.

Week I: What are propositions and why do we want a theory of them?

King, Soames, & Speaks, *New thinking about propositions* (chapters 1–3)

Week II: King's theory

King, Soames, & Speaks, *New thinking about propositions* (chapters 4, 7, 10)

Week III: Speaks' theory

King, Soames, & Speaks, *New thinking about propositions* (chapters 5, 8, 11)

Week IV: Soames' theory

King, Soames, & Speaks, *New thinking about propositions* (chapters 6, 9, 12)

Week V: Comparing Soames' and Hanks' act-type theories

Hanks, *Propositional content* (chapters 3–4)

Focus Questions

1. How do Hanks and Soames agree about the taxonomic content–force distinction, and differ on the constitutive content–force distinction?
2. How do different versions of the act-type theory treat the contents of compound sentences?
3. How can the act-type theory provide representationally equivalent but cognitively distinct propositions, and why might we want it to?
4. How do Hanks and Soames explain the inheritance of truth and falsity by act types from act tokens?
5. How scarce, or abundant, are propositions according to different versions of the act-type theory, and how abundant do we need them to be?