

“Propositional Attitudes and Mental Acts”

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Introduction

Peter Hanks and Scott Soames have recently developed similar views of propositional attitudes on which they consist at least partly of being disposed to perform mental acts (Hanks 2007, 2011, 2013, Soames 2010, 2012, 2013). Both think that to believe a proposition is at least partly to be disposed to perform the *primitive* propositional act: one the performance of which is part of the performance of any other propositional act. And both think that to perform the primitive propositional act is to perform sub-propositional acts like thinking of something, predicating, negating, conjoining, disjoining etc.¹ Finally, both also think that the primitive propositional acts explain what ties together the constituents of structured propositions into a representational whole because propositions just are types of such acts.²

However, they differ over the details. Soames takes the primitive propositional act to be the forceless *entertaining* and takes entertainings to consist of acts of thinking of and acts of predicating, which he thinks of as *non-committal* property ascription (Soames 2010, 2012, 2013). He then identifies the non-primitive propositional act of *judging* with entertaining + affirming, *believing* with being disposed to judge, and propositions with entertaining-types. In contrast, Hanks takes the primitive propositional act to be the forceful *judging* and takes judgments to consist of acts of referring and acts of predicating, which he thinks of as

¹ For an interesting precursor to views like this see Searle 1969.

² I'm inclined to think that there's a part of their approach to propositions that is essential to it, and a part that is negotiable. The essential part is the idea the primitive propositional acts tie together the constituents of at least *some* structured propositions. The negotiable part is the claim that propositions just are types of such acts.

committal property ascription (Hanks 2011: 13-14). He then identifies *believing* with being disposed to judge and propositions with judgment-types.³

My aim in this paper is to argue that Soames's "forceless" approach has an advantage over Hanks's "forceful" approach which faces a serious problem. I will proceed as follows. I'll start by showing how Soames's approach handles certain complex primitive propositional acts and how they pose a *prima facie* problem for Hanks's approach (Section 1). I'll then look at Hanks's purported solution and argue that it doesn't work, showing how serious the problem really is (Section 2).

1. Complex Propositional Acts

Soames takes the primitive propositional act to be the forceless *entertaining*. On his view to entertain the proposition that Bertrand is British is to perform the following sub-propositional acts: think of Bertrand, think of the property of being British, and predicate or non-committally ascribe the property of being British to Bertrand (hereafter predicate#), where the latter is what ties Bertrand and being British together in the proposition that Bertrand is British and makes it represent Bertrand as being British. Similarly, to entertain

³ Unlike Soames, Hanks doesn't think that the notion of forceless *entertaining* and the related notion of predication as *non-committal* property ascription make sense:

I cannot understand what it would be to predicate a property of an object without committing yourself to the object's having that property. I do not see how it is possible to apply or attribute a property to an object and yet remain neutral about whether the object has that property. (Hanks 2013)

This is why he takes the primitive propositional act to be the forceful *judging*. However, he nevertheless seems to think that an analogous notion does make sense:

On my account, to judge that *a* is *F* is to predicate, in a non-neutral sense, the property of *F* of *a*. If we like, we can say that sometimes this act of predication is preceded by the subject's contemplation of the act of predicating *F* of *a*. That kind of contemplation would be the analog, on my account of neutral predication or of entertaining a proposition. (Hanks 2013)

Unfortunately he doesn't tell us anything further about this analogous notion and how to think about it in terms of his proposal that the primitive propositional act is the forceful *judging*. I will therefore not discuss it further here. For general discussion of why we can't get by without the notion of forceless entertaining and the relations between entertaining and judging and judging and believing see Kriegel 2013.

the proposition that Gottlob is German is to think of Gottlob, think of the property of being German, and predicate# being German of Gottlob. I will represent this with the following notation (where ‘|’ represents entertaining, ...SUBJ what is the subject of predication, and ...PRED# what is predicated#):

- (1) entertaining the proposition that Bertrand is British = | <Bertrand_{SUBJ}, being British_{PRED#}>
- (2) entertaining the proposition that Gottlob is German = | <Gottlob_{SUBJ}, being German_{PRED#}>

In contrast, Hanks takes the primitive propositional act to be the forceful *judging*. On his view to judge that Bertrand is British is to perform the following sub-propositional acts: refer to Bertrand and to predicate or *committally* ascribe being British to him (hereafter predicate*), where the latter is again what ties Bertrand and being British together in the proposition that Bertrand is British and makes it represent Bertrand as being British. I will represent this with the following notation (where ‘|’ represents judging and ...PRED* what is predicated*):

- (3) judging that Bertrand is British = | < Bertrand_{SUBJ}, being British_{PRED*}>

Now, Soames’s “forceless” approach can easily handle certain complex primitive propositional acts like the entertaining of the proposition that it is false that Bertrand is German or the entertaining of the proposition that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German. To entertain the proposition that it is false that Bertrand is British is to think of the relevant proposition, think of the property of being false and predicate# the property of being false of the proposition. Similarly, to entertain the proposition that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German is to think of the two propositions and *disjoin#* them.⁴ What is

⁴ Soames prefers to think of disjoining as a primitive act which doesn’t presuppose grip on the property of being true (Soames 2010: 120-122). An alternative way is to think of it as predication of the property of being disjointly true where two propositions are disjointly true iff one or the other is true or one or more of them is

required for us to think of *propositions* in these cases? Soames thinks that to explain what ties together the constituents of structured propositions into a representational whole we need to think that our entertainings of propositions are metaphysically prior to the propositions themselves. The idea is that what it is to perform such acts can be analyzed without reference to propositions whereas propositions can just be identified with types of those acts. However, on such a view there is no other way of thinking of our direct cognitive access to propositions than in terms of performing a token of the act-type that is the proposition. Thus, since on this way of thinking we can't make sense of our cognitive access to propositions independently of the primitive propositional acts, it follows that we must perform the relevant token of the act-type that is the proposition. And this means that on Soames's approach to think of a proposition in these cases one has to entertain it.⁵ This leads to the following view of the makeup of the entertainings of the propositions that it is false that Bertrand is German and that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German:

(4) entertaining the proposition that it is false that Bertrand is German =

| < | <Bertrand_{SUBJ}, being German_{PRED#}>_{SUBJ}, being false_{PRED#} >

(5) entertaining the proposition that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German =

| < | <Bertrand_{SUBJ}, being British_{PRED#}>_{SUBJ}, | < Gottlob_{SUBJ}, being German_{PRED#}>_{SUBJ}, DISJ >>

true, but not both (Hanks 2011: 20). Since both ways of thinking about disjoining are compatible with both Soames's forceless and Hanks's forceful approach, I won't mention this further.

⁵ Not all cases where something is predicated# of propositions are like this. In the case of the above complex propositional acts the relevant propositions are thought of in a *revealing* manner or *directly*. However, we can think of propositions without entertaining them when we possess names of them. For example, if we name the proposition that Bertrand is German Jones and pass the name on to someone, then they can perhaps think of it and entertain the proposition that Jones is false. However, here the proposition is thought of in an unrevealing manner because one doesn't have to know which proposition it is. Similarly, we can perhaps "think of" propositions *indirectly* by using a description. For example, if we describe the proposition that Bertrand is German as the proposition such that to entertain it one must subject Bertrand and predicate# being British of it then we can think of it like this and entertain the proposition that it is false. However, here the proposition is "thought of" in an indirect manner, as whatever it is that satisfies the description.

And this is unproblematic. It's clear that when you entertain the proposition that it is false that Bertrand is German you also entertain the proposition that Bertrand is German and when you entertain the proposition that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German you entertain both the proposition that Bertrand is British and the proposition that Bertrand is German.

However, compare now how Hanks's "forceful" approach seems forced to handle complex primitive propositional acts like judging that it is false that Bertrand is German or judging that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German. To judge that it is false that Bertrand is British is to refer to the proposition that Bertrand is British and predicate* being false of it. Similarly, to judge that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German is to refer to the two propositions and *disjoin** them. What is required for us to refer to *propositions* in these cases? Like Soames, Hanks thinks that to explain what ties together the constituents of structured propositions into a representational whole we need to think that our judgments of propositions to be the case are metaphysically prior to the propositions themselves. The idea here is that what it is to perform such acts can be analyzed without reference to propositions whereas propositions can just be identified with types of those acts. However, on such a view there is no other way of thinking of our direct cognitive access to propositions than in terms of performing a token of the act-type that is the proposition. Thus, since on this way of thinking we can't make sense of our cognitive access to propositions independently of the primitive propositional acts, it follows that we must perform the relevant token of the act-type that is the proposition. And this means that on Hanks's approach to refer to a proposition in these cases one has to judge it to be the case. However, this leads to the following view of the makeup of the judgments that it is false that Bertrand is German and that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German:

(6) judging that it is false that Bertrand is German =

$\vdash < (\vdash < \text{Bertrand}_{\text{SUBJ}}, \text{being German}_{\text{PRED}^*} >_{\text{SUBJ}}), \text{being false}_{\text{PRED}^*} >$

(7) judging that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German =

$$\vdash < (\vdash < \text{Bertrand}_{\text{SUBJ}}, \text{being British}_{\text{PRED}^*} >_{\text{SUBJ}}), (\vdash < \text{Gottlob}_{\text{SUBJ}}, \text{being German}_{\text{PRED}^*} >_{\text{SUBJ}}), \text{DISJ} >$$

And this is of course absurd. It can't be that when you judge that it is false that Bertrand is German you also judge that Bertrand is German or when you judge that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German you judge both that Bertrand is British and Bertrand is German.

Thus, although Soames's approach can easily handle certain complex primitive propositional acts, they pose a prima facie problem for Hanks's approach. In the next section I'll look at Hanks's purported solution and argue that it doesn't work, showing how serious the problem is.

2. Cancellation

Here's Hanks's purported solution:

We can start with 'George is clever or Karla is foolish'. When a speaker assertively utters this sentence she neither asserts that George is clever nor that Karla is foolish, and she neither predicates cleverness of George nor foolishness of Karla. Frege took this to show that there is no assertive element in the contents of 'George is clever' and 'Karla is foolish', but it would be just as reasonable to conclude that the assertive element in these contents is cancelled or overridden by the presence of 'or'. This is the idea I want to pursue here. I maintain that by uttering these sentences inside a disjunction a speaker cancels the predicative acts she would have performed had she uttered them as stand-alone sentences. ... Although a speaker asserts neither disjunct by uttering 'George is clever or Karla is foolish', she still performs an assertion and hence an act of predication. The speaker asserts that George is clever or Karla is foolish. How should we understand the act of predication contained in this assertion? Let p and q be propositions expressed by

declarative sentences, that is, types of predicative actions. To assert that p or q is to predicate a disjunctive relation, expressed by ‘or’, of p and q. Two propositions p and q bear this disjunctive relation just in case either p is true or q is true. As types of predicative acts, the propositions p and q are true or false and hence can stand in this disjunctive relation. ... In predicating disjunction of p and q, however, one does not perform tokens of p and q themselves. In an utterance of ‘p or q’, the acts of predication one would otherwise find in tokens of p and q are cancelled by the use of ‘or’ (Hanks 2011: 20, see also Hanks 2007: 153)

What Hanks seems to say is that when you judge that it is false that Bertrand is German you predicate being German of Bertrand, but then *cancel* this predication when you further predicate being false of the proposition.⁶ Similarly, when you judge that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German you predicate being British of Bertrand and being German of Gottlob, but then *cancel* these predications when you disjoin them. We can represent this idea with the following notation (where *CANC* represents cancellation):

(8) judging that it is false that Bertrand is German =

$\vdash < (\text{CANC } \vdash < \text{Bertrand}_{\text{SUBJ}}, \text{being German}_{\text{PRED}^*} >_{\text{SUBJ}}), \text{being false}_{\text{PRED}^*} >$

(9) judging that either Bertrand is British or Gottlob is German =

$\vdash < (\text{CANC } \vdash < \text{Bertrand}_{\text{SUBJ}}, \text{being British}_{\text{PRED}^*} >_{\text{SUBJ}}), (\text{CANC } \vdash < \text{Gottlob}_{\text{SUBJ}}, \text{being German}_{\text{PRED}^*} >_{\text{SUBJ}}), \text{DISJ} >$ (compare Hanks 2011: 21)

⁶ One might be taken aback by Hanks’s remark above that “In predicating disjunction of p and q, however, one does not perform tokens of p and q themselves.” This seems to suggest that Hanks doesn’t think that we can’t make sense of our cognitive access to propositions independently of the primitive propositional acts and that to refer to a proposition in these cases one has to judge it to be the case. However, this is not how this remark is to be read. Rather, Hanks’s idea is that you do perform the act, but then cancel a part of it so you don’t end up performing the full act. If Hanks wouldn’t think that to refer to a proposition one has to judge it to be the case then the problem I described in the previous section wouldn’t arise. However, since he thinks that the problem arises and goes on to provide a solution he must think that to refer to a proposition in the above cases one has to judge it to be the case. Furthermore, he has confirmed that he does indeed think this (p. c.).

In order to see whether this purported solution works we need to know more about cancellation.

Although Hanks doesn't really say much about cancellation, it seems to me that there are only two possible ways of thinking about it. First, we could think that it completely obliterates the contribution of the previous act. Thus, it makes it the case that it is *as if* the previous act hadn't taken place. The problem with this is that then we lose what is supposed to tie together Bertrand and being German in the proposition that it is false that Bertrand is German. After all, a core part of Hanks's view is that those two constituents are tied together by the act of predicating* being German of Bertrand. However, if cancellation is complete obliteration of the contribution of the previous act, then we lose that. Thus, it seems that Hanks can't really adopt this way of thinking about cancellation.⁷

The second way to think about cancellation is to think that it obliterates a *part* of the contribution of the previous act. For example, one could think that the cancellation of predication obliterates the forceful part and leaves intact the part that does the tying . The problem with this is that it requires us to think of predication as having these separate parts. And then it seems that one of the parts, the one that does the tying, looks like predicating# or non-committal property ascription. However, once we accept this we lose all sense in which judgments are the primitive propositional acts because now it seems that they consist partly of entertainings. This is Soames's approach. Thus, it seems that Hanks can't really adopt this way of thinking about cancellation either. And since it seems that there aren't any other ways of thinking about cancellation, we can conclude that Hanks's purported solution doesn't work, showing how serious the problem really is.

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⁷ See also Hom & Schwartz 2013 for this point.

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