

Davidson on predication

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[5535 words]

The nature of predication, and its relation to truth, is the central topic of Davidson's posthumously published *Truth and Predication*. The main task which an account of predication should accomplish is a solution to the problem of predication; and that, Davidson tells us, is the problem of explaining what makes some collections of words, but not others, true or false (86). It is so-called because, Davidson thinks, the principal challenge faced by any answer to this problem is the problem of explaining the distinctive contribution made by predicates to the truth or falsity of sentences.

One way to see the difficulty which Davidson has in mind, and to see the distinctive solution he proposes to that difficulty, is to begin by looking at the kinds of solutions to the problem of predication which he opposes. A good place to begin is with Davidson's discussion of Plato's explanation of predication. On Davidson's interpretation, Plato tried to solve the problem of predication by saying that while names, like 'Theaetetus,' refer to objects, verbs, like 'sits', stand for the property (or universal, or form) of sitting. But, Davidson points out, if we consider the sentence "Theaetetus sits," we can see that

[i]f the semantics of the sentence were exhausted by referring to the two entities Theaetetus and the property of Sitting, it would be just a string of names; we would ask where the verb was. The verb, we understand, expresses the relation of instantiation. Our policy, however, is to explain verbs by relating them to properties and relations. But this cannot be the end of the matter, since we now have three entities, a person, a property, and a relation, but no verb. When we supply the appropriate verb, we will be forced to the next step, and so on. (85-6)

We begin by noting that a name followed by a verb is a sentence — which can be true or false — whereas a name followed by another name is not. It is very plausible that, in Davidson's terms, this suggests that in order to solve the problem of predication what we first need to do is to explain the differences in the 'semantical roles' of names and predicates. Plato suggests, in effect, that we do this by assigning different sorts of entities as the contents of names and predicates: objects to the names, and universals to the predicates. Davidson's argument aims to show that no explanation of the difference between names and predicates of this sort can work. There are two ways to reconstruct this argument.

The first begins with the point that for any sentence which can be true or false — e.g., 'Theaetetus sits' — we can find another collection of words which correspond to the same contents — e.g., 'Theaetetus the property of sitting' or 'Theaetetus the relation of

exemplification the property of sitting’ — which is ‘just a string of names’ and is therefore not the sort of thing which can be true or false.

The second is to point out that if we assign Theatetus as the content of “Theatetus” and sitting as the content of “sits”, we’ve then assigned to the sentence two entities: Theatetus and the property of sitting. But this is simply a list of two items, which is not the sort of thing which can be true or false. The fact that one of the two items is a property gets us no closer to understanding how a pair of things could be true or false, and hence gets us no closer to a solution to the problem of predication.

A natural response to this second way of pressing Davidson’s objection is that it is not the list — Theatetus, the property of sitting — which is true or false, but rather the *proposition* which predicates sitting of Theatetus. To go this route is to advocate a style of solution to the problem of predication which might be called *propositionalism*:

Propositionalism: $\forall S (S \text{ is a string of words} \rightarrow (S \text{ has a truth-value} \rightarrow S \text{ has a truth-value because } S \text{ expresses a proposition with that truth-value}))$

If one gives a propositionalist answer to the problem of predication, then the problem of predication morphs into the problem of the unity of the proposition. This is because the propositionalist hopes to explain the truth or falsity of sentences in terms of the truth or falsity of the propositions which those sentences express; but this leads directly to the questions: (i) What are propositions?, and, given an answer to this question, (ii) What makes those things apt to be true or false? The problem of the unity of the proposition is, more or less, the problem of answering (i) and (ii).¹

It’s worth flagging the fact that, even if the problem of the unity of the proposition could be solved, this by itself would not be enough to validate the propositionalist’s solution to the problem of predication. That solution, after all, makes use not just of facts about the truth-values of propositions, but also of facts about the *expression* relation holding between sentences and propositions; hence it’s reasonable to expect that the propositionalist should be able to say something about what this relation is, and the facts in virtue of which it holds between a sentence and one proposition, but not another. This is a notoriously difficult thing to do — but the difficulty of doing this was not Davidson’s

¹ It’s true that classic discussions of this problem, like Russell’s discussion in of the *Principles of Mathematics*, often sound as if the problem has more to do with, well, *unity* than (i) and (ii) do. Russell worries, for example, that he’ll be unable to give an adequate account of the nature of propositions on the grounds that “a proposition ... is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition.” (51) But one can understand Russell here as operating under the assumptions that (to use his example) the proposition that *A* differs from *B* somehow involves the propositional constituents *A*, difference, and *B*, but also is genuinely a single entity, and asking (question (i)) what sort of entity could satisfy this condition. Russell then tests candidate entities — like the fact that *A* stands in the relation of difference to *B* — to see whether (as question (ii) requires) they’re the sorts of things that could be true or false.

central objection to the propositionalist view, so we can set it aside for the moment.² But, as we'll see below, the fact that it does *not* face this extra explanatory burden can be seen as a significant strength of Davidson's view.

Davidson's target in *Truth and Predication* is not the narrow one of refuting one or two attempted solutions to the problem of predication; rather, I think, his aim is to show that the propositionalist form of response to the problem of predication is fundamentally misguided. As I read him, Davidson thought that propositionalism was hopeless because he took the problem of the unity of the proposition which it engenders to be insoluble; an argument for this conclusion is the burden of the argument of Ch. 5 ("Failed attempts") of *Truth and Predication*.

What we get there is, in large part, a guided tour through failed propositionalist responses to the problem of predication: Aristotle's view of predication as ascription of universals dependent on the substances which instantiate them, Russell's and Strawson's Platonic theories of propositions, and, finally, Frege's view of predicates as incomplete expressions.³ In each case, the propositionalist theory in question is refuted by some version of the argument wielded against Plato.

As noted above, one way to press this argument is to point out (as Russell did, and as Davidson does) that for any true string of words (like "Theatetus sits") there is a corresponding string of words which involves no predication, and hence is neither true or false, which differs from the true string of words only by the replacement of synonyms for synonyms (e.g., "Theatetus sitting"). Hence one might think that the argument against the propositionalist theory of predication can be blocked by, following Frege (in spirit if not in terminology), insisting on the principle that expressions of different grammatical categories — like 'sits' and 'sitting' — can never refer to the same entity.

Davidson, I think rightly, rejects this as a superficial solution to the problem. As he nicely puts the point,

² Well-known attempts to solve the problem include the intention-based semantics of Grice (1969) the convention-theoretic view of Lewis (1975), and a use theory of the sort defended in Horwich (1998). The former two views lead directly to the question of what it takes for a subject to stand in attitude relations to propositions; for a sampling of answers to this question, see Stich & Warfield (1994).

One might, however, reasonably doubt whether Davidson could object that the propositionalist can give no satisfactory explanation of the expression relation since, arguably, if Davidson's own interpretivist approach to the foundations of intentionality is satisfactory, it should be able to provide the wanted account of this relation. More on Davidson's interpretivism below.

³ The discussion of Frege comes a bit later, in Ch. 7. It's worth noting that some non-propositionalists come in for criticism there as well. Quine and Sellars, for example, are, even if praised for avoiding the pitfalls of a propositionalist theory of predication, also criticized for failing to provide a sufficient positive account of predication.

One oddity here is that the very widely held view of propositions as sets of worlds, or functions from worlds to truth-values, gets no mention in Davidson's discussion. Perhaps that is because the view that assigns to predicates a function from world/object pairs to truth values is sufficiently similar to Davidson's own positive view. More on the latter below.

if ...predicates refer to entities, and this fact exhausts their semantic role, it does not matter how odd or permeable some of the entities are, for we can still raise the question of how these entities are related to those other entities, objects. (145)

Even if we assign to predicates entities which could never be the content of a singular term, we cannot explain the difference between truth apt and non-truth apt strings of words simply by a theory of the entities which those words have as their contents, because, as Davidson emphasizes, a collection of entities is not the sort of thing which can be true or false. We're still left with the questions of how those entities could combine with objects into a proposition (whatever that is) and of why that entity should be the sort of thing which can be true or false. That is, we're still left with questions (i) and (ii) above — the core of the problem of the unity of the proposition.

Davidson's skepticism about the appeal to propositions to solve the problem of predication is of a piece with the skepticism about explanatory appeals to 'meanings as entities' which has been a part of his work since the 1960's. As he famously remarked in "Truth and Meaning,"

"the one thing meanings do not seem to do is oil the wheels of the theory of meaning ... My objection to meanings in the theory of meaning is not that they are abstract or that their identity conditions are obscure, but that they have no demonstrated use."

This is something, as *Truth and Predication* makes clear, about which Davidson never changed his mind. His objection to propositionalist attempts to solve the problem of predication is never that the entities postulated by those attempts don't exist, but rather that, even if they did, they would not help to explain truth and falsity.⁴

Even advocates of propositionalist views of predication — of which, for full disclosure, I am one — should admit that, in this chapter, Davidson is pretty much completely right.⁵ The propositionalist theories which he criticizes don't explain truth and falsity; and they don't explain truth and falsity for just the reasons that Davidson gives. And Davidson is surely right if we can't give a satisfactory account of what propositions are, and how things of that sort could be true and false, then the propositionalist's attempt to explain the truth or falsity of sentences in terms of the truth or falsity of propositions looks a bit empty.

Of course, propositionalists might well respond to this argument not by giving up on propositionalism, but by looking for a better theory of propositions. I'll return to this idea below. But first, now that we have a handle on the sort of view of predication that

⁴ See, for example, pp. 85-6.

⁵ Except, I think, when he moves from his criticisms of specific propositionalist theories to the falsity of propositionalism more generally. More on propositionalist theories which seem to avoid Davidson's criticisms below.

Davidson wants us to avoid, let's look at Davidson's non-propositionalist solution to the problem of predication.

Davidson presents that solution in the final chapter of *Truth and Predication*. If the key negative aspect of the view is his rejection of propositionalist accounts of predication, the key positive idea is that predication is to be explained in terms of truth. We begin with a Tarskian truth theory for a language, which specifies the conditions under which predicates are true of objects, and then explain the unity of sentences in terms of their possession of truth conditions:

How does Tarski's methodology solve the problem? The first thing I claimed that we could learn from the history of failures was how central the concept of truth is to any solution ... The importance of the connection is this: if we can show that our account of the role of predicates is part of an explanation of the fact that sentences containing a given predicate are true or false, then we have incorporated our account of predicates into an explanation of the most obvious sense in which sentences are unified, and so we can understand how, by using a sentence, we can make assertions and perform other speech acts. (155)

At first glance, this seems too easy. Could it really be that all that is needed to solve the problem of predication is a recognition that predicates are true of objects? And since any reasonable theory of predication — whether propositionalist or not — will be consistent with the fact that predicates can be true of objects, does this 'solution' really tell us anything at all about predication?

This reaction is too quick. It is true that any reasonable view of predication will be compatible with the fact that predicates can be true of objects. But it is not obvious that every view of predication can explain the semantic role of predicates in terms of the truth conditions of sentences; and this last idea is the key to Davidson's theory.

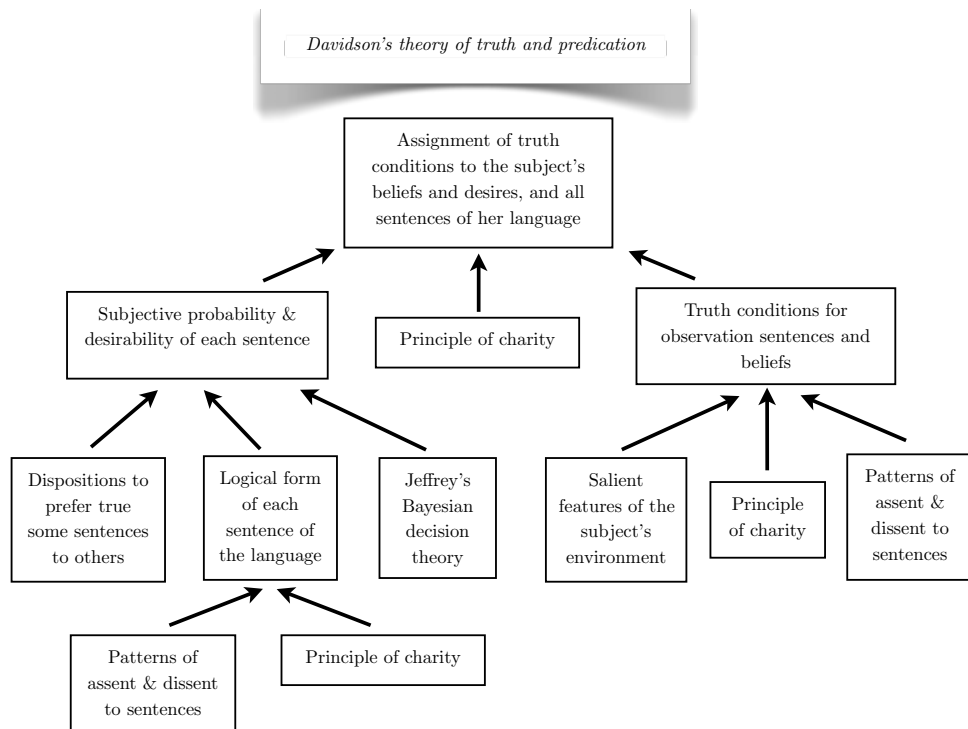
Consider by contrast a propositionalist theory. Propositionalists explain the truth conditions of sentences in terms of the truth conditions of the propositions they express (in the relevant context) and hence explain the semantic role of predicates in terms of their contribution to those propositions. Hence if Davidson is right that we can't solve the unity of the proposition, and hence can't explain the truth conditions of propositions, then, much as they might *like* to say that predicates are true of objects, propositionalists have not earned the right to this claim. One might view Davidson's positive theory of predication as an attempt to, unlike the propositionalist, earn the right to the claim that predicates are true of objects.

But if Davidson proposes to explain predication in terms of the truth conditions of sentences, how does he propose to explain the latter? The outlines of his answer to this

question are well-known, but are presented nowhere more compactly and lucidly than in Ch. 3 of *Truth and Predication*.⁶

On Davidson's view, the truth conditions of sentences are given by the correct Tarskian truth theory for the languages of which those sentences are a part. Accordingly, the story about what it is for a sentence to have certain truth conditions will explain the facts about a language user in virtue of which the correct Tarskian truth theory for her language is correct. In outline, we begin with the agent's patterns of assent and dissent to sentences. These patterns interact with the 'principle of charity' in two ways. First, the principle of charity guarantees that an agent's observation sentences (and observational beliefs) will (modulo qualifications about explicable error) be true in the salient environmental circumstances in which the agent is disposed to assent to those sentences; this gives us truth conditions for observation sentences (64-65). Second, the principle of charity guarantees both that (modulo the same qualifications) any two sentences to which a speaker assents must be logically consistent; this gives us an interpretation of the logical constants of the language (62-63). Given these facts about logical form, we use facts about which sentences an agent 'prefers true' to which other sentences to extract, via Jeffrey's version of Bayesian decision theory, the subjective probability and 'subjective desirability' assigned to each sentence (67-73). These facts about subjective probabilities then combine with the assignment of truth conditions to observation sentences to yield an assignment of truth conditions to every sentence of the language. This might be roughly diagrammed as follows:

⁶ For earlier presentations of Davidson's ideas on these topics, see Davidson (1973a) and Davidson (1973b), both reprinted in Davidson (1984).



Davidson sometimes describes his theory as going beyond Tarski by giving the sense, or content, of 'true', which can suggest that he takes the concept of truth to be identical with the full set of the connections outlined above, so that '*S* is true' would be synonymous with '*S* is ...', with the ellipsis filled in by the full story about radical interpretation, Bayesian decision theory, and the rest. But I don't think that this is the best way to view Davidson's theory.⁷ Rather, I think that we can understand Davidson as giving an account of *what it is* for a string of words *S* to be true or false: it is for the collection of facts diagrammed above to give *S* a truth condition.

If Davidson has succeeded in specifying conditions necessary and sufficient for a string of words to have a truth condition, then he has solved the problem of predication — and with vastly fewer resources than the propositionalist. Though Davidson sometimes talks as if the problem of predication just is the problem of the unity of the proposition, it might be more apt to think of Davidson as solving the problem of predication in such a way that the problem of the unity of the proposition does not arise. This is doubly advantageous, for not only does Davidson escape having to give an account of the nature of propositions — which, as he shows, leads to formidable problems — but also escapes having to give an account of the relation of 'semantically expressing' which, the propositionalist says, holds between sentences (and contexts) and propositions. One might summarize the difference between propositionalist views of predications and Davidson's

⁷ And, in some places, he's clear that he's not offering a *definition* of truth to rival those given by correspondence or epistemic theories; see, e.g., p. 75 note 18.

by saying that whereas the propositionalist locates the solution to the problem of predication in the special representational properties of a class of abstract objects, Davidson locates it in us, our actions, and our dispositions.

Of course, the ‘if’ which begins the previous paragraph is a big one. The idea that we can give necessary and sufficient conditions for possession of a certain truth conditions in the way that Davidson suggests has been subjected to a variety of criticisms in the last few decades, and here I won’t attempt anything like a summary or adjudication of these debates. Instead, I’ll just mention three problems which seem to me to be quite serious.

The first is whether the principle of charity can play anything like the central role Davidson assigns to it. The problem, as John Hawthorne puts it, is that there often seems to be an interpretation of the language of the subject which “has the virtue of being charitable ... but the vice of being crazy.”⁸ These interpretations will be, by anyone’s lights, implausible — an example might be an interpretation which makes my (apparent) name for my wife a name for someone whom I’ve never met, but who has more of the qualities I attribute to my wife than she does. A theory like Davidson’s always faces the question of whether the constraints put on the assignments of truth conditions to sentences are strong enough to rule out these crazy but charitable interpretations; Davidson’s discussions of this topic, while suggestive, are not sufficient to answer these sorts of concerns.⁹

The second concerns the extent to which Davidson’s theory presupposes rather than explains the distinction — that between truth apt sentences and strings which lack this quality — for which the problem of predication asks for an account. As Davidson presents his view, patterns of assent and dissent to sentences come in near the ground floor of his explanation of the concept of truth (63). But one wonders how we are to distinguish assent and dissent to sentences from various non-verbal (and non-truth apt) noises, which, just as much as assent and dissent to observation sentences, might be well-correlated with various features of the subject’s environment. The worry is that if this can’t be done, and if we have to take the category of a sentence as basic, then we’ve assumed a solution to, rather than solved, Davidson’s problem of predication.

The third concerns the question of whether we can, ultimately, do without propositions. Ordinary language is full of apparently true sentences which seem to immediately entail the existence of non-linguistic abstract objects which are expressed by sentences, the contents of mental states, and the bearers of truth values — since that is what propositions are supposed to be, it seems fair to say that ordinary language is full of apparently true sentences which seem to immediately entail the existence of propositions.

Consider, for example:

John said something.

What John said was true.

⁸ Hawthorne (2007), 427.

⁹ For discussion of some of the problems here, and some possible solutions, see Williams (2007), Bays (2007), and Hawthorne (2007).

Though what John said was true, it would have been false, if things had gone differently.

What John said is what Mary believed.

It's hard to deny that sentences like these are often true; and equally hard to deny that these sentences jointly entail claims like

There is something which John said, which was true, which could have been false, and which Mary believed.

the logical form of which seems to be, roughly,

$\exists x$ (John said x & x is true & x could have been false & Mary believed x)

And what could make the parenthetical open sentence true other than a proposition?¹⁰

But once we let propositions in the door, a propositionalist account of predication is not far behind. Once we admit propositions which are true or false, and see that (if ordinary language is to be believed) everything else which is true or false (like a sentence token, an utterance, or a belief) is true or false iff the proposition which is its content is true or false, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the truth of sentences is to be explained in terms of the truth of propositions. After all, it would be very odd if the truth of some sentence S were utterly disconnected from the truth of the proposition it expresses, which suggests that either the truth of the sentence should be explained in terms of the truth of the relevant proposition, or the reverse. But the idea of explaining the truth of propositions in terms of the truth of sentences which express them seems less than promising, since instances of

It could have been true that S , even if the sentence ' S ' had never existed.

seem (at least for sentences which are not about themselves) very plausible. Hence we are apparently forced, by the existence of propositions, into a propositionalist approach to the problem of predication.

Davidson, of course, was well aware of this sort of problem, and proposed an ingenious theory — the paratactic analysis — which, he hoped, would enable us to admit the relevant natural language sentences as true without being thereby committed to propositions. Suffice it to say that whether the paratactic analysis can succeed at this task is still very much an open question. Though I'm skeptical, the issues are difficult and beyond the scope of this essay.¹¹ Hence, rather than further pursue the question of whether the proponent of Davidson's account of predication can ultimately escape propositionalism, I'd like to conclude by examining some recent attempts by

¹⁰ It can't be a sentence, for the familiar reason that John and Mary might be speakers of different languages.

¹¹ See LePore & Loewer (1989) for an excellent summary of, and attempt to reply to, the main objections. I defend a more skeptical viewpoint in Ch. 2 of King, Soames, & Speaks (ms.).

propositionalists to solve the problem of the unity of the proposition. This work is especially interesting in the present context, since some of the most important recent work on this topic can be understood as incorporating some of the central insights of Davidson's non-propositionalist approach to predication.

I have in mind especially the theories defended in Jeff King's 2007 *The Nature and Structure of Content*, and Scott Soames' 2010 *What is Meaning?* Both King and Soames believe in propositions, and each would, I think, give basically the propositionalist answer to Davidson's problem of predication. This is by itself unremarkable. What's interesting in the present context is that, unlike the theories of propositions Davidson criticizes, neither King nor Soames thinks that we can explain how propositions could be true or false *just* by saying what sorts of entities they are. King, for example, "just can't see how propositions or anything else could represent the world as being a certain way *by their very natures and independently of minds and languages*."¹² Soames, similarly, holds that "there is nothing ... in any abstract structure we might construct, or explicitly specify, which, *by its very nature*, indicates that anything is predicated of anything. Hence, there is nothing intrinsic to such structures that makes them representational, and so capable of being true or false."¹³

To this extent, King and Soames agree with Davidson's criticisms of traditional propositionalist treatments of predication. But, unlike Davidson, this doesn't lead them to throw out propositionalism altogether; rather, it pushes them towards a brand of propositionalism according to which the representational properties of propositions aren't simply explained by their intrinsic properties, but rather are given to those propositions by the cognitive and linguistic activity of language using subjects.

It's not clear that Davidson's criticisms of propositionalism cut any ice against such views. Let's consider, for illustrative purposes, a simplified version of King's theory. On that theory, propositions are a certain sort of fact. To use one of King's examples, let's consider the proposition that Michael swims. This proposition is the fact whose constituents are Michael, the property of swimming, and the propositional relation corresponding to the following open sentence:

there is a context c and assignment g such that \underline{x} is the semantic value (relative to c and g) of a lexical item e of some language L and \underline{y} is the semantic value (relative to c and g) of a lexical item e' of L such that e occurs at the left terminal node of the sentential relation R that in L encodes ascription and e' occurs at R 's right terminal node.¹⁴

King's view (again, roughly speaking) identifies the proposition that Michael swims with the fact obtained by assigning Michael as value to the free variable 'x', and the property of swimming as value to the free variable 'y'.

¹² King (2009), 260. Emphasis in original.

¹³ Soames (2010), 31. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴ For more detailed presentations and discussions of King's view, see King (2007), King (2009), and King, Soames, & Speaks (ms.).

Davidson might press the question (as he does against other propositionalist views): what gives this fact representational properties? What makes *it* the sort of thing that could be true or false? Unlike traditional propositionalists, King (as well as Soames) thinks that this is a question to which he owes an answer. In King's view, the answer is that the proposition gets its representational properties from speakers of the language interpreting this propositional relation as ascribing the relevant property to the relevant object. As with Davidson's view, our explanation of truth and falsity, and hence of predication, bottoms out not with the specification of the structure of some class of abstract objects, but rather with the thought and action of language using subjects. One might, of course, object to various aspects of King's explanation of the truth and falsity of propositions; but Davidson provides no reason to think that no such explanation can be given.

Another objection Davidson might press is more directly concerned with unity: what unifies propositions, as King thinks of them? To this question, King has a ready answer: they are unified by propositional relations, which genuinely hold between the constituents of the proposition (in the above example, Michael and the property of swimming). Davidson would not, I think, be satisfied with this answer; according to Davidson, the problem of the unity of the proposition is "much the same problem" as Bradley's regress argument against the existence of relations. (105) King's theory, he would object, leaves open the question of how the relevant propositional relation is related to the propositional constituents it supposedly relates. If it is "nothing to" those constituents, then it can hardly relate them. But if it is "something to" them, it must stand in another relation to them — but then we're off on a regress, the conclusion of which is that the holding of one relation requires the holding of indefinitely many other relations to connect that relation to its relata.

Here, I think, Davidson's argument is at its weakest. If his ultimate argument that the problem of the unity of the proposition is insoluble is really that unity can only be explained by relations and there are no relations, he owes substantially more argument for that last claim than the brief recital of Bradley that he offers. A plausible case can be made (as Russell pointed out in the very work which Davidson uses Bradley to criticize) that Bradley's regress is, even if genuine, not vicious.¹⁵ (This use of Bradley's argument is also a departure from Davidson's more usual — and I think more powerful — style of argument, which objects to various metaphysical posits not on the grounds that their existence is incoherent, but rather on the grounds that they don't do the explanatory work for which they were introduced.)

Proponents of Davidson's program in semantics will likely not see the need for any propositionalist theory of the sort Soames and King defend, since they will take the case for propositions to be substantially undermined by the successes of the paratactic analysis of apparent references to propositions in ordinary language. But those who, on the one hand, find propositions difficult to give up, and, on the other hand, find Davidson's criticisms of traditional propositionalist views compelling, may find in the new

¹⁵ See Russell, *Principles of Mathematics* §§55, 99.

propositionalist views of King and Soames a kind of view which incorporates the insights both of traditional views of propositions, and their critics.

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