

5. Propositions are properties of everything or nothing

Jeff Speaks

1. Two kinds of theories of propositions.....	1
2. Propositions, their constituents, and syntax	2
3. Properties, truth, & representation.....	6
4. Propositional attitudes.....	8
5. The semantics of attitude ascriptions	13
6. Two unresolved puzzles.....	17
6.1. A puzzling substitution failure	
6.2. A demarcation problem	

1. TWO KINDS OF THEORIES OF PROPOSITIONS

One way of dividing the space of possible views of propositions is between those who take propositions to be a *sui generis* category of entity, and those who take propositions to be members of another ontological category. Let’s call these, respectively, *non-reductive* and *reductive* views of propositions. Well-known reductive views include the view of propositions as functions from worlds, or indices of some other sort, to truth-values.

There are general reasons for preferring reductive views. They have a built-in advantage of ontological parsimony, since they countenance one less category of entity than ontologies which contain *sui generis* propositions.¹ They also promise greater explanatory power — if we can explain otherwise puzzling features of propositions in terms of features of the ontological category to which propositions are assimilated.

There are also reasons to be doubtful of the existence of the *sui generis* propositions posited by non-reductive theories. One such challenge was raised by Russell. In ‘On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood,’ Russell asked us to consider some false sentence, like ‘Gore won in 2000’ and asked how, given that there is no such thing as Gore’s having won in 2000, there could be such a thing as *that Gore won in 2000*.² Russell’s idea seems to

¹ Though this is complicated a bit by the fact that proponents of the non-reductive views might analyze entities of some other type as a kind of proposition, as with views which take facts to be true propositions, and further complicated by the fact that proponents of reductive views might as well — so long, of course, as the category to be reduced to propositions isn’t the same as the category to which the reductive theorist aims to reduce propositions to.

² See Russell’s discussion of ‘that Charles I died in his bed’, in Russell (1910), p. 151.

have been that when we ascribe a property to an object, there is the object, the property ascribed, the act of property ascription, and, if the object instantiates the property, the fact of the thing's having the property; but there is no room for some *other* thing, the proposition that the object has that property. To be sure, Russell's worry here rests on a bare metaphysical intuition: that once we cross the relevant objects, properties, and facts off the list, there's no room left for entities of some other kind, which are "about" the relevant situation, to squeeze their way in. But, unargued as it is, the intuition seems to me to be a powerful one — and the best way to answer it seems to be to identify *that Gore won in 2000* with some object, property, fact, or event in which we have independent reason to believe.

A second reason to be skeptical about *sui generis* propositions, separate from but related to Russell's, comes from the oddness of supplementing an ontology of objects, properties, facts, events, etc. with another category of entity whose sole roles are to be the contents of mental states and sentences, and the bearers of truth and falsity. It seems oddly anthropocentric to add a category to our ontology solely to play these roles; surely it would be better, all things being equal, to find a class of entity to play these roles among the types in which we already have independent reason to believe.³

My aim will be to advance a reductive view of propositions. In my view, propositions are a kind of property. As is well-known, defenders of (close relatives of) this view have included Roderick Chisholm and David Lewis; and, more recently, Peter van Inwagen has defended the view that propositions are 0-place properties.⁴ My view is in many ways similar to these. But as will become clear, my view also borrows a lot from an apparently quite different view of propositions — Jeff King's view that propositions are a kind of fact.⁵

2. PROPOSITIONS, THEIR CONSTITUENTS, AND SYNTAX

Since propositions are, among other things, what are expressed by sentences, one way into the question of what propositions are is via the question: what sort of thing does a sentence express?

What a sentence expresses — its semantic content, relative to the relevant context — is closely related to the contents of the expressions which compose the sentence. Let's consider for illustrative purposes a simple monadic predication, "Amelia talks." Let's call

³ Though here I am setting aside issues about the nature of the constituents of propositions, this is one place in which these issues come to the fore. This is because a defender of a Fregean view of content — on which the constituents of propositions are modes of presentation of objects and properties rather than those objects and properties themselves — might reasonably claim to have an answer to Russell's skeptical argument; after all, she might say that true propositions are, in effect, modes of presentations of facts, whereas false propositions are modes of presentation of nothing — but which could be modes of presentations of facts, were the facts different. But this won't help with the second worry, which focuses on the oddness of postulating a class of entities to serve as the contents of mental states and sentences.

⁴ Lewis (1979), Chisholm (1981), van Inwagen (2004).

⁵ See King (2007) and Chapter 4 above.

the proposition expressed by this sentence PROP, and let's suppose that the content of "Amelia" is a certain person, Amelia, and the content of "talks" is the monadic property of talking.⁶ In this sort of case, let's call Amelia and the property of talking the *constituents* of PROP; and, in general, we can say that if e is a semantically simple expression which is a part of some sentence S , then, in our sense, the content of e will be a constituent of the proposition expressed by S . This gloss on "constituent" is intended to make the claim that propositions have constituents pretty metaphysically unexciting, and therefore common ground between various views of propositions; it does not, for example, build in any assumptions to the effect that the relationship between propositions and their constituents is analogous to the relationship between composite material objects and their parts.⁷

Whatever view we take of the nature of PROP, it seems that it should bear some close relation to its constituents, namely Amelia and the property of talking. After all, there are some interesting necessary connections between the two, like the following:

Necessarily, anyone who entertains a thought with content PROP entertains a thought about Amelia.

Necessarily, anyone who entertains a thought with content PROP entertains the thought of an objects that it has the property of talking.

The existence of necessary connections of this sort indicates that, in some sense or other, the constituents of a proposition are part of its identity.

But, on the other hand, it would be a mistake to respond to the necessary connections between propositions and their constituents by simply identifying propositions with the collection of their constituents, or saying that propositions are "nothing over and above" their constituents. That this would be a mistake is shown by the fact that there are distinct propositions with the same constituents. The propositions expressed by

Jane loves John.

⁶ Here, for simplicity, I am setting aside some qualifications — first, the qualification that sentences typically express propositions only relative to contexts and, second, that perhaps sometimes sentences express only fragments of propositions (even relative to contexts). For a defense of the latter view, see [cite].

This discussion also obviously presupposes a particular (Russellian) view about what sorts of thing the constituents of propositions are. But the foregoing could be restated to accommodate other views; for example, a Fregean will want to replace talk about objects as constituents of propositions with talk about individual concepts, and will want to replace talk about properties and relations with talk about modes of presentation of those properties and relations. Nothing in what follows will depend upon one choice or another here, though I will stick with the Russellian view for simplicity. (And because I think that it is true.)

⁷ For some discussion of whether we should take 'constituents' talk more seriously than this, see Ch. 11 below.

and

John loves Jane.

each have John, Jane, and loving as their constituents, but are plainly not identical.

The same lesson can be drawn from Russell's observation in the *Principles of Mathematics* (§52) that substitution of one expression for another with the same content can transform a sentence — which expresses a proposition relative to a context — into a string of words which does not express a proposition. To adapt his point to the present example, “loves” and “loving” are apparently both terms for the relation of loving; but, while

John loves Jane

expresses a proposition,

John loving Jane.

expresses nothing. If propositions really were nothing over and above their constituents, it is puzzling why this should be so. Why should switching out one term for another with the same content change a string of words from one which is proposition-expressing to one which is not?

This all seems to indicate that propositions are — speaking somewhat metaphorically — their constituents plus some extra ingredient. The problem of giving a theory of the nature of propositions then becomes the problem of saying what this extra ingredient is.

Jeff King's theory of propositions is based in part on the idea that this extra ingredient has something to do with the syntax of proposition-expressing sentences. This seems plausible especially when we think about examples like Russell's; it seems quite plausible that the difference between “John loves Jane” and “John loving Jane” is to be explained in terms of the fact that strings with the syntactic form of the former — those consisting of a name, concatenated with a two-place predicate and another name — express propositions in English whereas strings with the syntactic form of the latter — those consisting of a name, followed by an abstract singular term, followed by another name — do not.

But the “extra ingredient” we're looking for can't just *be* a syntactic relation — a point which King brings out nicely via the example of a possible language, Nenglish, which is like English but for the fact that concatenation of a name and a predicate expresses a proposition which is true iff the referent of the name does *not* instantiate the property expressed by the predicate. Hence “Amelia talks” would express a different proposition in Nenglish than it does in English — despite the fact that in both languages Amelia and the property of talking are the constituents of the proposition expressed by the sentence, and that in both languages the syntactic form of the sentence is that it is a name concatenated with a monadic predicate.

What this example brings out is that syntactic relations, just like linguistic expressions, can make different semantic contributions in different languages. Perhaps, then, our extra ingredient has something to do with the semantic contribution of the syntactic form of the sentence which expresses the relevant proposition.

So far, so good. But this view raises some further questions. Exactly how should we think about the semantic contribution of syntax? And what does this tell us about what propositions are?

Simplifying a bit, King answers these questions as follows. He suggests that we think of the semantic significance (in English) of the relation between “Amelia” and “talks” in “Amelia talks” as the following instantiation function from objects, properties, and worlds to truth values: the function which, given as argument an object o and property F , determines the truth value true at w iff o instantiates F at w . He then embeds this view of the semantic significance of syntax in a view that propositions are a certain kind of fact. We can, in King’s view, describe the proposition expressed by ‘Amelia talks’ as follows: it is the fact of there being words x and y of some language such that x has Amelia as its content, y has the property of talking as its content, $R(x,y)$, and R encodes the instantiation function.⁸

Though I think that this view has many attractive features, it’s here that King and I part company. So long as we stick with the view that propositions are a kind of fact, then it is hard to avoid the view that the relevant facts are in part about the linguistic items that express propositions. But I think that a simpler view, which avoids the detour through existential quantification over linguistic expressions, is available if we think of propositions as properties, rather than as facts.

Consider again the example of ‘Amelia talks.’ If we think of the semantic content of this sentence as a property, one natural view is that the property is the property of being such that Amelia talks. On this kind of view, what is contributed by the syntax of a simple predication — the semantic significance (in English) of this bit of syntax, in King’s terms — is something like the three-place relation corresponding to the open sentence ‘__ is such that __ instantiates __’. In the case of the sentence ‘Amelia talks’, the contents of the name and predicate fill in the second two slots to deliver the monadic property expressed by ‘__ is such that Amelia instantiates the property of talking.’

This view accommodates the two pieces of data about the relationship between propositions and their constituents mentioned above. As on King’s view, the difference between “John loves Jane” and “John loving Jane” is explained by the fact that the syntactic form of the former has, in English, a semantic content, whereas the syntactic form of the latter does not. And we get an explanation of the distinctness of the

⁸ See, e.g., King (2007), 37.

propositions that John loves Jane and that Jane loves John in terms of the distinctness of the properties of being such that John loves Jane and being such that Jane loves John.⁹

Though the view that propositions are a sort of property may sound odd at first, it actually fits much of our talk about propositions rather naturally. We might say that believing a proposition, for example, is taking the world to be a certain way. But if, as it seems, “ways things are” are properties, this indicates that having a belief is taking a certain attitude toward a property. Parallel points might be made about mental states other than belief, and speech acts like assertion; we can hope, intend, and desire that the world be a certain way; and we can say, assert, and suggest that the world is a certain way. Again, if ways things can be are properties, this suggests that the objects of mental states and speech acts — i.e., propositions — are properties.

3. PROPERTIES, TRUTH, & REPRESENTATION

Supposing that propositions are monadic properties of this sort, what are these monadic properties properties *of*? They are properties of, if anything, everything. After all, given that Amelia does instantiate the property of talking, every thing instantiates the property of being such that Amelia talks. Hence the proposition that Amelia talks — i.e., the property of being such that Amelia talks — is true iff it is instantiated.¹⁰ So, for example, it is sufficient for this proposition to be true that I, or my house, or a rock, instantiate the property of being such that Amelia talks.

At this point, I think that the following sort of objection might occur to many:

“What could it be for *me* to instantiate the property of being such that Amelia talks? This property has nothing to do with how I am. Surely if I do instantiate this property, this is just for me to exist while the proposition that Amelia talks is true; which means that any attempt to analyze the truth of this proposition in terms of the instantiation of this property gets the order of explanation backwards.”

But why hold this view about the correct order of explanation? We can all agree — *modulo* worries about the existence of the property of being such that Amelia talks — that I instantiate this property iff I exist and the proposition that Amelia talks is true.

⁹ One might object that this is not much of an explanation; isn't this just a relabeling of the fact which was supposed to need explanation? I don't think so. Anyone who believes in the existence of complex properties, like the property of being such that John loves Jane, must already accept the fact that the property of being such that John loves Jane is distinct from the property of being such that Jane loves John. It's an explanatory gain if we can show that the distinctness of the propositions that John loves Jane and that Jane loves John is nothing over and above this fact about properties. Maybe this fact about the identity conditions of properties is itself deeply mysterious, and in need of explanation; but even if this is so, it is so whether or not we identify propositions with properties — and it is better to have one mystery than two.

¹⁰ More generally, for any proposition P , P is true iff P is instantiated. Note that this generalization is restricted to propositions; some properties can be instantiated without being true, because some properties are not propositions. More on this point in §6.2. [discuss worries about liar paradox]

Taking the left hand side of this biconditional as basic has the advantage that we need postulate no new category of entities, in addition to properties. And it is hard to see what advantage taking the right hand side as basic could have; after all, any analysis of what it is for the proposition that Amelia talks to be true will equally serve as an analysis of what it is for any existent to instantiate the property of being such that Amelia talks.

There are several different ways in which this view of propositional truth can be generalized to an account of truth with respect to a world (or arbitrary circumstance of evaluation), but the simplest is as follows. Propositions are properties which are true iff they are instantiated. Propositions are true with respect to a world w iff, were w actual, that property would be instantiated — or, equivalently, iff, were w actual, the proposition would be true.¹¹ Given this view of truth at a world, thinking of propositions as properties does not seem to require any serious revision in the way that we think about entailment relations between propositions, or semantics more generally. Propositions are necessary iff they are true with respect to every possible world; just so, on the present account, the propositions are necessary iff the properties which they are are instantiated in every possible world. One proposition F would entail another proposition G iff any world in which F is instantiated is also a world in which G is instantiated.

I mentioned at the outset that view of propositions which assimilate propositions to members of an ontological category — in this case, properties — in which we have independent reason to believe enjoy the advantage of (relative) ontological parsimony. While this is, I think, a genuine advantage, it is worth noting that — given the account of truth, and truth at a world just sketched — it comes with a significant string attached. If propositions are properties which are true iff they are instantiated, then it seems clear that we must think that there are uninstantiated properties, and indeed properties which could not be instantiated. Otherwise, there would be no account of the propositions expressed by false, and necessarily false, sentences.¹²

Even if this view of propositions does make available clear explanations of truth and truth at a world, there is one aspect of the traditional theory of propositions which it does not capture. This is the view that, as Scott Soames puts it, propositional attitudes are representational “because of their relations to inherently representational propositions.”¹³ Properties like the property of being such that Amelia talks are not inherently representational things; hence if propositions are properties of this sort, this

¹¹ There are, however, reasons not to go for this simple generalization, especially if one thinks that (a) propositions can’t be true without existing, (b) singular propositions can’t exist unless their constituents do, and (c) some singular propositions have contingently existing objects as constituents. I discuss these issues in *Speaks* (forthcoming).

¹² Though it is worth noting that the view is not committed to the existence of *simple* necessarily uninstantiated properties, which may well seem more troubling than complex necessarily uninstantiated properties. A view of properties which I think would suit my purposes is outlined in van Inwagen (2004). But I think that the view of propositions I am developing would be consistent with various views of what properties are, so long as those views are not committed to any sort of principle of instantiation (or possible instantiation).

¹³ Soames (forthcoming).

aspect of the view of propositions common to Frege and (the early) Russell must be rejected.

This may seem like a cost; but there is also a benefit here. The idea that an entity can be intrinsically representational has seemed to many to be a puzzling one. If we can give an account of truth and propositional attitudes (about which more below) without making use of entities of this sort, this is a good thing.

4. PROPOSITIONAL ATTITUDES

My sketch of the view that propositions are properties has been, in one respect, quite different than the way this topic is discussed in, for example, Chisholm and Lewis. Both Chisholm and Lewis approach the topic not by asking what sorts of things are expressed by sentences, but rather by asking what sorts of things are the objects of propositional attitudes.

This is more than a difference in order of exposition. Both Chisholm and Lewis — as well as contemporary defenders of their view¹⁴ — advance the view that the objects of the attitudes are properties without identifying propositions with properties. This view can sound paradoxical, since it sounds like the denial that propositional attitudes are relations to propositions. But this is a superficial objection; there’s nothing incoherent in the idea that one sort of a thing, a proposition, is expressed by sentences, while another sort of thing, a property, is the content of mental states. In this respect, the Chisholm/Lewis view about properties is less ambitious than the view that I’m defending; they think that properties can play some of the roles standardly assigned to propositions, whereas I think that properties can play all of the roles — including, crucially, the role of being expressed by sentences.

There are some general reasons to prefer the “pure” view that properties can play all of the roles assigned to proposition over a “mixed” view of the sort defended by Lewis and Chisholm, according to which properties are the objects of the attitudes, and some other sort of thing is what is expressed by sentences.¹⁵

One sort of reason for preferring the pure property theory over a mixed theory is based on the sort of ordinary language considerations often used to introduce talk about propositions in the first place. The mixed view is forced, for example, to deny face value readings of apparently true bits of ordinary language discourse like

That sentence expresses my belief perfectly.

This sentence certainly seems to entail

What that sentence expresses is something I believe.

¹⁴ See especially Feit (2008, 2010) and Turner (2010).

¹⁵ Of course, Chisholm and Lewis had different views about the nature of the propositions expressed by sentences — it’s just that they agreed that these entities were distinct from the properties that were the objects of the attitudes.

which in turn seems to entail

$\exists x$ (that sentence expresses x & I believe x)

which seems to be inconsistent with the mixed view that propositions are expressed by sentences, properties are the objects of belief, and propositions \neq properties.¹⁶

A second reason for preferring the pure property theory is simply that the mixed theory leaves us without a theory of propositions. This is, obviously, not a pressing objection if one feels able to give an independent account of propositions, or if one is happy to take them as a primitive category in one's ontology. But if one is (perhaps for the reasons sketched at the outset) unhappy with non-reductive views, and dissatisfied with the reductive alternatives to the view that propositions are properties, these considerations will push one towards a pure version of the property theory of propositions.

Even if a pure theory is to be preferred, and even if Lewis and Chisholm each went for a mixed theory, that doesn't show that we can't learn from their treatment of the attitudes, since there is no reason (for all we've said) why one couldn't integrate their theory of the attitudes into a pure theory. So let's turn to the Lewis/Chisholm theory of propositional attitudes.

If the objects of the attitudes are properties, then it is natural to think that belief must be believing of something that it is a certain way; supposing must be supposing that something is a certain way; guessing must be guessing that something is a certain way; and so on. A basic question for defenders of this view of the attitudes is: what is this "something"?

Lewis and Chisholm gave basically the same answer to this question: in their view, propositional attitudes are ascriptions of properties to *oneself*. Chisholm expressed the theory like this:

"Believing must be construed as a relation between a believer and *some* other thing ... What kind of thing, then? ... The simplest conception, I suggest, is one which construes believing as a relation between a believer and a property — a property which he may be said to attribute to himself."¹⁷

It is understandable why the view was introduced in this way, since its principal initial motivation was the explanation of the distinction between first-personal beliefs and third-personal beliefs about oneself — or, as Chisholm put it, between the emphatic and non-emphatic reflexive.

There seems to be a distinction, to use one of many standard examples, between my believing of myself that I am on fire, and my believing that Jeff Speaks is on fire. It seems

¹⁶ See the discussion of the "proposition sentences" in Ch. 2 above.

¹⁷ Chisholm (1981), 27. For a similar statement of the view, see Lewis (1979), pp. xx.

that I might have either belief without the other, if I am sufficiently confused about my identity. And this point is not limited to belief; parallel remarks could be made about intuitively “first-personal” vs. “third-personal” desires, intentions, etc. But, as is well-known, it is notoriously difficult for the proponent of the view that beliefs are relations to propositions to find a distinction between propositions to correspond to this intuitive difference — at least as long as we aren’t willing to let our propositions include exotica like rigidly designating essentially first-personal modes of presentation.

The proponent of the view that beliefs are self-ascriptions of properties, by contrast, can readily capture this sort of distinction between mental states by saying that first-personal belief that I am on fire is the self-ascription of the property of being on fire, whereas my third-personal belief that Jeff Speaks is on fire is the self-ascription of the property of being such that Jeff Speaks is on fire. These are, plainly, self-ascriptions of distinct properties — which is just what we should want. And once we make this move for beliefs about oneself, it seems that the apparatus can be extended to account for beliefs about what is happening *here*, or *now*, and other sorts of indexical belief.¹⁸

The view that attitudes are self-ascriptions of properties can thus be given a powerful motivation. But it also faces some serious problems.

For one, it seems to violate seeming platitudes about the truth conditions of beliefs, like

A’s belief is true iff what *A* believes is true

On the property theory, what *A* believes — the content of *A*’s belief — is a property. This in itself need not be problematic, if we adopt the account of what it is for a property to be true sketched in the preceding section. But consider what sort of properties are assigned as the contents of beliefs in the key case of first personal belief. In the case of the first-personal belief that one is on fire, the Lewis/Chisholm theory assigns as the content of the belief the property of being on fire. What would it take for *this* property to be true?

We can’t say that this property is true iff it is instantiated, since (given the above platitude) this would entail that my belief that I am on fire can be made true by someone other than me is on fire. And we can’t require for its truth that everyone instantiate the property, since the truth of my belief doesn’t require that everyone be in flames. And we can’t require that *I* instantiate the property, since that would make the truth of others’ first-personal beliefs that they are on fire hostage to my temperature rather than their own. We could, of course, get round this sort of problem by letting the property self-ascribed in the case of my first-personal belief that I am on fire be the property of being such that Jeff Speaks is on fire, since then we could say that what the subject believes is

¹⁸ The idea is that we can analyze beliefs about what is happening here as beliefs about what is the in the same place as me, and beliefs about what is happening now as beliefs about what is happening at the same time as the time at which I exist — though the latter analysis requires us to think of the subjects of the attitudes as time-slices of persons. See the discussion of the example of the insomniac in Lewis (1979), §VII.

true iff the property is instantiated — but this would remove the wanted contrast between first- and third-personal beliefs, and hence sacrifice the motivation for the view that propositional attitudes are *self*-ascriptions of properties.¹⁹ The only plausible move here seems to be to abandon the platitude, and say that talk about the truth of a subject’s belief comes apart from talk about the truth of what the subject believes; but this, I think, is hard to accept.

A second sort of problem for the Lewis/Chisholm theory — which has been developed by Markie (1988) and Nolan (2006) — stems from the observation that, while in many cases nothing is lost by thinking of a propositional attitude with the content p as a belief that I am such that p is the case, in other cases, understanding the content of the belief requires that we consider worlds where p is the case, but in which I am not such that p is the case, because I do not exist. The most striking case is perhaps the example of the desire that I not exist. On the Chisholm/Lewis theory, this is interpreted as the desire that I instantiate the property of nonexistence. But this seems wrong, since it is impossible that I have the property of nonexistence, and the desire that I not exist is not a desire for something impossible.²⁰

How might the defender of the Chisholm/Lewis theory of the attitudes reply to this criticism? One interesting suggestion, defended in different ways in Feit (2010) and Turner (2010), is that we can defuse this objection by appealing to something like the distinction, employed in a different context by Kit Fine, between truth *in* a world and truth *at* a world — where the latter does not require existence at that world.²¹ If we accept this distinction, then we might say that my desire that I not exist is true at w iff I can instantiate the property of not existing *at* w iff the proposition that I don’t exist is true at (not in) w .

I’m sympathetic to Fine’s distinction and to the idea that a defender of the idea that properties are the objects of the attitudes might use this distinction to avoid the result that the desire that I not exist be a desire for something impossible. But this move comes at a cost. Instantiating a property at a world is defined in terms of the truth of propositions at a world; hence it seems that anyone who appeals to this notion of having a property at a world must adopt what above I called a “mixed” theory, according to which, while properties are the objects of the attitudes, propositions still exist as

¹⁹ Of course, the proponent of this view might try to distinguish the properties of being such that Jeff Speaks is on fire and the property of being such that I am on fire. But then all the work is being done by this distinction between first-personal and third-personal properties, and none by the idea that the attitudes are self-ascriptions of properties.

²⁰ Here I’m setting aside the view of Williamson (2001) that everything which exists does so necessarily.

²¹ See, among other places, Fine (1985).

members of some other ontological category. For the reasons given above, I think that it would be better to avoid this result.²²

Finally, the foregoing objections aside, I think that the idea that all of my mental states involve attributions of properties to myself should strike us as odd. Imagine someone engaged in purely abstract reasoning — say, a mathematician. It’s very counterintuitive to think of the mathematician as trying to figure out what *she* is like — it seems like what she cares about is not which properties she has, but what the world is like, or what numbers are like. It should be possible for thinking to be less self-involving than the Lewis/Chisholm view makes it out to be.²³

Fortunately, there is no reason why the view that propositions are properties must be tied to the view that all thought is self-ascription. But if we reject this view, this leaves us with the question raised earlier this section: given that belief is believing something to be a certain way, if this “something” is not oneself, then what is it?

There is a sense, I think, in which this question has no answer. To believe that Amelia talks, there is no special object which one must believe to be such that Amelia talks; it is enough if one takes there to be *something* which is such that Amelia talks. Of course, often one takes a property to be instantiated by something because one takes it to be instantiated by something in particular, and this is as true of the property of being such that Amelia talks as it is of other properties. One might, for example, believe the proposition that Amelia talks by taking *the world* to be such that Amelia talks; this fits nicely with the intuitive idea that in, for example, the case of belief, one “takes the world to be a certain way.”

One might, however, wonder whether Nolan’s objection to the Chisholm/Lewis theory of the attitudes can be resurrected as an objection to the present view. Just as one can desire that one never have existed, can’t one desire that the world never have existed, or that there should have been nothing rather than something? This seems to be a coherent desire; but on the present interpretation, this would be the desire that the property of there being nothing be instantiated — which, given that a property is instantiated only if it is instantiated by something, is impossible.

However, I think that this objection can be defused by distinguishing two interpretations of the desire that there be nothing rather than something. On the first

²² This needn’t be the end of the story. One might adapt the essentials of Turner’s response to Nolan and then try to give a theory of what it is for an object to have a property at a world which did not go via some proposition’s being true at that world. I think that it is plausible that this could be done for the case of the desire that I not exist. But, as Turner recognizes, a full solution to Nolan-type problems requires an account not just of overtly first personal mental states, but also for desires like the desire that there be world peace — since we don’t want this to entail a preference, *ceteris paribus*, for worlds in which I exist and there is world peace over worlds where there is world peace without me. And though it is somewhat plausible that I can have the property of nonexistence at a world without existing in that world, it is not plausible that this is so for every property, and, in particular, it seems implausible that I can instantiate the property of being such that there is world peace at a world without existing in that world.

²³ Though see Nolan (2006), 678-9, for some interesting discussion of how the view that all thought is self-involving in the relevant sense seems to follow from Lewis’ views about modality.

interpretation, the desire that there be nothing rather than something is something like the desire that there be no concrete things, or no material things. But (presuming that it is possible that there be no concrete things, or no material things) the properties assigned as contents to this desire are possibly instantiated, and so the desire comes out — as it should, on this interpretation — as a desire for something possible. After all, in a world in which there are no concrete things, there will be things — necessarily existing abstract objects, for example — which instantiate the property of being such that there are no concrete things.

On the second interpretation, the desire that there be nothing rather than something really is the desire that there be *nothing* — no concrete things, no abstract things, no things of any sort. It is true that, on the present view, the content of this desire turns out to be a necessary falsehood (if we assume, as I do, that a property cannot be instantiated unless something instantiates it). But this consequence does not seem to be objectionable, since it seems independently plausible that some things — like at least some abstract objects — exist necessarily.²⁴ So on neither interpretation of Nolan’s problematic desire does it pose a problem for the view that propositions are properties which, if instantiated, are instantiated by everything.

Now, it should be noted that the fact that my view avoids this sort of puzzle for the Chisholm/Lewis view — as well as the other objections raised against that view — comes at a cost. That theory was explicitly developed to explain the distinction between first-personal and third-personal beliefs and, more generally, the distinction between indexical and non-indexical beliefs. And, as it stands, the view of the attitudes just sketched offers no explanation of this distinction. In the next section I’ll return to the question of whether the sort of “property theory” I’ve been developing can capture some of the explanatory advantages of the Chisholm/Lewis theory.

5. THE SEMANTICS OF ATTITUDE ASCRIPTIONS

If propositions are properties, then it is natural to think that propositional attitudes are, not binary relation to a propositions, but ternary relations between subjects, properties, property and the thing to which the subject attributes the property. Were this true, this might lead us to expect that ordinary belief ascriptions of the form

A believes that *S*

should not express binary relations between subjects and propositions, but rather ternary relations, and hence to be of the form

A believes of *o* that it is *F*.

²⁴ Though, even if it is not objectionable that the desire that there be nothing come out as impossible on this second interpretation, there still may be some oddness in treating it as the desire that a certain property be instantiated. But this oddness seems to be shared with the traditional view of desire as a propositional attitude, since on such a view the desire that there be nothing will be equivalent to the desire that a certain proposition be true.

where ‘ F ’ stands for is the property expressed by ‘ S ’ in the context. However, there is no plausible candidate for the value of ‘ o ’, for two reasons. First, (as noted above) there is nothing to stop two different subjects from each believing that Amelia talks, but to do so by believing the property of being such that Amelia talks to hold of distinct things. Second, we would get into trouble with the modal profiles of attitude ascriptions if we supplied as value for ‘ o ’ anything whose nonexistence was consistent with the truth of the ascription.

We can get around this problem by analyzing attitude ascriptions as existential generalizations of the form

$$\exists x A \text{ believes of } x \text{ that it is } F.$$

which are true with respect to a world w iff the referent of ‘ A ’ in w believes of some object in w that it is F (where F is the proposition expressed by the complement of the ascription). This sort of view also stays a bit closer to the standard semantics for belief ascriptions, in that it does not take them to predicate a ternary relation of a subject, a world, and a proposition, but rather a binary relation between a subject and a proposition — albeit a binary relation defined by existential generalization on a ternary relation.²⁵

But this view also faces a serious problem. It appears that, given the truth of an ascription

$$A \text{ believes that } S$$

this view would license us to infer the truth of

$$\exists x A \text{ believes of } x \text{ that it is such that } S.$$

The problem is that (setting aside the, at present, irrelevant point that languages don’t contain singular terms for every object) such examples of quantifying into attitude ascriptions seem to entail, for some singular term n , the truth of

$$A \text{ believes that } n \text{ is such that } S.$$

But then, if we re-apply our analysis of ordinary attitude ascriptions, we find that this entails the truth of

$$\exists x A \text{ believes of } x \text{ that it is such that } n \text{ is such that } S.$$

which in turn, for some singular term n^* , entails the truth of

²⁵ In this respect, the view of belief is similar to that defended in Salmon (1986).

A believes that n^* is such that n is such that S .

and we're off on a regress, the upshot of which is the implausible conclusion that having a single belief entails having infinitely many beliefs of ever-increasing complexity.²⁶ The problem is that every de re ascription entails a corresponding de dicto ascription, so if we also analyze de dicto ascriptions as disguised de re ascriptions, we have, in effect, two valid rules of inference which can be alternated to generate, from a seemingly true belief ascription, ascriptions of arbitrarily complex beliefs. This shows that the idea that ascriptions should be analyzed as disguised existential quantifications into the complements of the ascription is a mistake.²⁷

We can do better by setting aside the initial idea that we should think of attitude ascriptions as reporting ternary relations between subjects, properties, property and the thing to which the subject attributes the property. Instead, we can — sticking more closely to the traditional view that ascriptions report dyadic relations between subjects and *sui generis* propositions — think of ascriptions as reporting binary relations between subjects and properties. Just as, on the traditional view, one might give an informal gloss on the belief relation by saying that it is “taking a proposition to be true” one might, on the present view, gloss that relation by saying that it is “taking a property to be instantiated.”²⁸ Parallel things could be said about other propositional attitudes, which will be different relations in which a subject can stand to a property; one might take it to be instantiated, desire it to be instantiated, suppose it to be instantiated, etc.

Once we have this view of the attitudes, it's open to us to recognize the existence of the relation between subjects and properties with which Chisholm and Lewis identified

²⁶ Alexis Burgess suggested to me the possibility that this regress could be blocked by taking note of the fact that the initial existential generalization is a sentence of the meta-language, and that when we “re-apply our analysis” we've ascended to the meta-meta-language — and from the truth of some sentence of the meta-meta-language we are not automatically licensed to infer the truth of the corresponding sentence of the object language. There may well be something to this idea — and it would be very nice, for my purposes, to have a response to this regress argument. But there's an intuitive worry about this strategy. The sentences of the meta- (and meta-meta-) language will, like the sentences of the object language, presumably express propositions. So, for example, some proposition P will be expressed by the sentence “ $\exists x A$ believes of x that it is such that n is such that S ” of the meta-meta-language. And some proposition Q will be expressed by just this string of words in the object language. The problem, it seems to me, is that it looks quite plausible that P will entail Q . But, if it does, then the regress argument goes through — even if we pay attention to the distinction between object and meta-language.

²⁷ The same problem would arise if we took belief ascriptions to report ternary relations between the subject, the relevant property, and the higher-order property of being instantiated.

We could solve either problem by adopting a sufficiently coarse-grained view of properties to block the claim that the beliefs ascribed at various stages in the regress are genuinely distinct. But this would plug one hole in the theory only to introduce problems elsewhere, since we'd then face all the problems with belief ascriptions faced by coarse-grained theories of propositions. See, for discussion, Soames (1988) and Ch. 3 above.

²⁸ Though this is just an informal gloss; the idea is not that belief is to be analyzed as a three-place relation between subjects, properties, and the property of being instantiated, since this would lead to the same sort of regress just discussed.

belief — namely, self-attribution. (This would be the “self-predicating” attitude analogous to belief; we could also recognize self-desiring, self-intending, and so on.) Recognizing the existence of such a relation is, of course, independent of the the various claims about its relation to belief, and ascriptions of belief, which led to the troubles with the Chisholm/Lewis theory of belief.

Taking the existence of this relation seriously allows us to capture some — though not all — of the explanatory advantages of the Chisholm/Lewis theory. Consider the problem of finding a distinction between mental states which are “first-personal” and those which are not. On the present view, this shows up as a distinction between different attitudes in which one can stand to properties. In the case of belief, this would be the distinction between my standing in the belief relation to the property that JS is on fire and my standing in the self-attribution relation to the property of being on fire.

This does not, by itself, solve parallel problems about indexicality which arise at the level of propositional attitude ascriptions — in particular, it does not explain why it seems to many competent speakers that, out of my mouth, “I believe that Jeff Speaks is *F*” can differ in truth value from “I believe that I am *F*.” One popular style of explanation of these speaker intuitions explains them away in terms of a confusion between the truth of the semantic content of a sentence and the truth of some proposition which would, in the relevant context, be pragmatically conveyed by an utterance of that sentence. Proponents of this strategy owe some account of the relevant pragmatically conveyed propositions, as well as an account of the mechanism by which those propositions are pragmatically conveyed by the relevant utterances. If we recognize the existence of the attitude of self-predication, then this might give us the beginnings of such an account. Perhaps when I utter an ascription \ulcorner I believe that I am *F* \urcorner , I pragmatically convey the proposition that JS self-attributes the property denoted by ‘*F*’.²⁹ In the relevant cases, the truth-value of this proposition will come apart from the truth-value of the proposition that JS believes-to-be-instantiated the property of being such that JS is *F*.

One might object that this is supposed explanatory advantage is one shared with any reasonable theory, since any theory — whatever it says about the nature of propositions — can recognize the existence of the relation between subjects and properties which I’m calling “self-attribution.” But, to do this, proponents of some other view of propositions — whether they defend a non-reductive view, or aim to reduce propositions to an ontological category other than properties — must introduce a distinction between different sorts of contentful mental states, treating some as relations to propositions, and others as relations to properties. Echoing Lewis, I “protest that the advantages of uniform objects are not to be lightly forsaken.”³⁰ The fact that the property theory can recognize the

²⁹ One might also take this to be part of the semantics of attributions of first-personal beliefs; I’m skeptical about this sort of view, since it would treat “believes” as ambiguous, which would lead to problems with capturing certain valid inferences from pairs of first-personal and third-personal ascriptions. The problems here are analogous to the problems for Quine’s view that notional and relational senses of “believes” should be distinguished which are pointed out in Salmon (1995).

³⁰ Lewis (1979), 532.

existence of the attitude of self-attribution, while preserving a consistent treatment of contentful mental states as relations to the same type of entity, is a point in its favor.

6. TWO UNRESOLVED PUZZLES

I conclude by sketching two puzzles for the view sketched so far, which point out different respects in which that view is incomplete.

6.1. *A puzzling substitution failure*

Even if the view of attitude ascriptions sketched in the previous section is fine as far as it goes, it falls well short of a full treatment of that-clauses and reference to propositions more generally. This can be shown by consideration of a puzzle about attitude ascriptions — a puzzle which, I think, faces any attempt to treat propositions as denizens of some other ontological category (whether propositions, or facts, or mental event types, or sets). If “that”-clauses refer to propositions, and if propositions are properties, then it seems as though the following inference should be valid:

Bob believes that Amelia talks.

Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks.

But the conclusion seems barely coherent, let alone entailed by the premise.

One might think that this is a place in which the present theory of propositions can come to its own rescue. After all, given that loving is the relation denoted by ‘loves’, one might have thought that the following should be valid:

A loves B .

A loving B .

But this is not valid, since the conclusion fails to express a proposition — and this fact (as noted above) is a fact which the view that propositions are properties promises to explain. Might we offer a similar explanation of the invalidity of the first argument in terms of the fact that ‘Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks’ fails to express a proposition?

Perhaps, but it is not quite this easy. We can’t simply say that

Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks.

fails to express a proposition because sentences of the form

A believes the F .

are ungrammatical since, in general, they aren't — we can meaningfully and truly say

Bob believes the proposition expressed by 'Amelia talks.'

This suggests that the conclusion of the problematic argument above is not ungrammatical, but simply false.

This places a constraint on the sort of semantics for attitude ascriptions which the defender of the present view — who will have a hard time denying that 'that Amelia talks' and 'the property of being such that Amelia talks' refer to the same thing — can accept. In particular, it looks like the proponent of the view of propositions that I have been sketching will have to deny the following principle:

If an attitude ascription $\ulcorner A \text{ } V\text{'s } x \urcorner$ is true -- where A is the name of the subject of the ascription, V is the attitude verb, and x is some term which refers to a proposition — then any other well-formed ascription which differs from this only by the replacement of x with another term for the same proposition must also be true.

It can't be denied that this principle has a great deal of initial plausibility. However, there is some independent reason to deny it.³¹ Consider, for example, the pair of sentences

Joe fears that the Mets will win the World Series this year.

Joe fears the proposition that the Mets will win the World Series this year.

These are both grammatical, but the first is true, and the second is false — Joe may be afraid of many things, but propositions are not among them. And this is so despite the fact that, on any view, "that the Mets will win the World Series this year" and "the proposition that the Mets will win the World Series this year" refer to the same proposition.

The proponent of the view of propositions as properties might seize on examples like this, and say that whatever explains the fact that these sentences about Joe's fears differ in truth-value can also explain the fact that our initial pair of sentences,

Bob believes that Amelia talks.

Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks.

can differ in truth-value, despite the fact that 'that Amelia talks' and 'the property of being such that Amelia talks' both designate the same thing. To be sure, it is not obvious that this line of response is satisfactory, since it is not obvious that the explanation of the

³¹ For a much more in-depth discussion of these issues, see King (2007), chapter 5.

‘fears’ substitution failures will carry over to the example we are interested in; but the two sorts of examples do seem similar, so it is perhaps not unreasonable to hold that the right treatment of the ‘fears’ examples will solve our own problem.³²

6.2. *A demarcation problem*

On the present view, propositions are properties. But are all properties propositions? Presumably not. Redness is a property, but, unlike the property of being such that Amelia talks, not a proposition. This view about the relationship between propositions and properties has, of course, many analogues in philosophy. Proponents of the view that mental states are brain states don’t for that reason think that every brain state is a mental state; and proponents of the view that propositions are functions — e.g. from worlds to truth-values — don’t think that addition, just because it is a function, must also be a proposition.

But this leads to a question for the proponent of the view that propositions are properties: if not all properties are propositions, what distinguishes the ones that are from the ones that are not?

A first answer which suggests itself is that the properties which are propositions are the ones which are such that, if they are instantiated at all, are instantiated by

³² One plausible explanation of the examples involving ‘fears’, which is defended in King (2007) (153-163) is that some attitude verbs, including ‘fears,’ are ambiguous. This will only help with our ‘believes’ example if ‘believes’ is also ambiguous; but it may not be implausible to say that it is. Consider, for example:

Joe believes that the Reds will win the World Series this year.
Joe believes Dusty.

If we take these sentences at face value, then it looks like ‘believes’ expresses different (though obviously related) relations in these two sentences. Perhaps the problem with our troublesome pair of ‘belief’ sentences is that

Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks.

forces the interpretation of ‘believes’ exemplified by ‘Joe believes Dusty.’

This is, obviously, a view on which ‘believes’ is ambiguous (though the two meanings are of course related). But it is nowhere near a systematic account of this ambiguity. A systematic account would have to explain why the first interpretation of ‘believes’ is triggered not just by belief ascriptions involving that-clauses, but also by sentences like the following:

Bob believes what Amelia said.
Bob believes the proposition expressed by what Amelia said.
Bob believes the first thing he hears every day.

and so on. For an interesting discussion of some alternatives to this view that ‘believes’ is ambiguous in this way, see King (2007), p. 157, note 39.

everything.³³ But a moment's thought shows that this won't work, since the property of existence (if such there be) and the property of being self-identical are, if instantiated at all, instantiated by everything, and yet these properties don't seem to be propositions.

One might reply by pointing out a difference between the property of being such that Amelia talks and the property of self-identity: the latter, but not the former, is such that it is necessarily instantiated. So maybe we could say that propositions are such that (i) if they are instantiated at all, are instantiated by everything, and (ii) they are possibly not instantiated. The obvious objection, though, is that though (i) and (ii) may work for the property of being such that Amelia talks, they won't work for the property of being such that $2+2=4$, since this, like the property of being self-identical, satisfies (i) but not (ii).

A quite different approach would be to demarcate the propositions not using an intrinsic criterion, but an extrinsic one, e.g. by saying that a certain property is a proposition iff it can be expressed by a sentence. But this looks similarly hopeless, partly because it is not obvious that every proposition is possibly expressed by a sentence, and partly because it seems to get the order of explanation backwards. Why, one wonders, is "My pants are on fire" a sentence, whereas "Pants" is not? Presumably because the former expresses a proposition, and the latter does not.³⁴

So, while it would be very nice to have a demarcation criterion, it's not at all easy to see how to state one.³⁵ But, while this is a vice, it is not a vice unique to the view that propositions are a kind of property.

Proponents of the view that propositions are a *sui generis* category of entities also owe a statement of a demarcation criterion — and, typically, fail to provide one. Suppose we ask a proponent of that view why *that grass is green* is a proposition while *being green* is not. What should they say? They might say: *that grass is green* belongs to the *sui generis* category of propositions, whereas *being green* does not. But is this any better than the proponent of the property theory of propositions taking the distinction between those properties which are propositions, and those which aren't, as primitive?³⁶

³³ This is parallel to the way that Chisholm demarcates propositions from states of affairs; see Chisholm (1976), 122-4.

³⁴ For an attempt to explain the distinction between sentences and non-sentences which does not appeal to propositions, see Davidson (2005).

Other 'extrinsic criteria' might be more plausible. One might (as Alexis Burgess suggested to me) try to explain which properties are propositions in terms of certain, perhaps modal, relations holding between the instantiations of properties. For the use of a strategy like this in demarcating the laws of nature, see Lange (2009).

³⁵ This would be one reason to prefer van Inwagen's version of the property theory over mine. van Inwagen takes propositions to be 0-place properties; this provides a neat way of distinguishing the propositions that are properties from those that are not. Despite this, I prefer my version because I don't understand what a 0-place property could be.

³⁶ Friends of the view that propositions are *sui generis* entities might try to explain this distinction in terms of the fact that *that grass is green* is true or false, whereas *being green* is not — an explanation of which I cannot avail myself, since I take truth for propositions to be instantiation, and these properties are, equally, instantiated. But this move does not seem plausible, since it involves taking truth as explanatorily prior to propositions — see for discussion Ch. 3 above.

And, in fact, lots of view which identify the F 's with some subset of the G 's do so without identifying a criterion for distinguishing the G 's which are F 's from the G 's which aren't — a case in point is the view that mental properties are a subset of the physical properties. Proponents of that view typically don't also provide an explicit criterion to divide the physical properties which are also mental properties from those which aren't. If this is no decisive objection to that view, it's not easy to see why it should be a decisive objection to the view that propositions are properties — even if this is something we should want a fully satisfactory theory of propositions to provide.³⁷

³⁷ Thanks to Alexis Burgess, Ben Caplan, Lorraine Juliano-Keller, Matthew Lee, and Juhani Yli-Vakkuri for comments on previous versions of this essay, and to the participants in my graduate seminars at Notre Dame in the spring of 2008 and fall of 2009 for discussion of issues surrounding the metaphysics of propositions.

- Chisholm, Roderick. 1976. *Person and Object*. London: Routledge.
- Chisholm, Roderick. 1981. *The First Person: An Essay on Reference and Intentionality*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Davidson, Donald. 2005. *Truth and Predication*. Truth and Predication. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Feit, Neil. 2008. *Belief About the Self: a Defense of the Property Theory of Content*. 1st ed. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Feit, Neil. 2010. "Selfless Desires and the Property Theory of Content." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88 (3) (September): 489–503.
- Fine, Kit. 1985. "Plantinga on the Reduction of Possibilist Discourse." *Plantinga*.
- Johnston, Mark. 2004. "The Obscure Object of Hallucination," *Philosophical Studies*, 120: 113-83.
- King, Jeffrey C. 2007. *The Nature and Structure of Content*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lange, Marc. 2009. *Laws & Lawmakers: Science, Metaphysics, and the Laws of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, David. 1979. "Attitudes De Dicto and De Se," *Philosophical Review*, 88: 513-43.
- Moltmann, Freiderike. 2003. "Propositional Attitudes without Propositions," *Synthese*, 135: 77-118.
- Nolan, Daniel. 2006. "Selfless Desires," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 73: 665-79.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1910. "On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood". *Philosophical Essays*: Longmans, Green & co.
- . 1912. *The Problems of Philosophy*. London: Clarendon Press.
- Salmon, Nathan. 1986. *Frege's Puzzle*. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company.
- . 1998. "Is Belief De Re Reducible to Belief De Dicto?," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary volume 23: 85-110.
- Salmon, Nathan. 1995. "Relational Belief." In *On Quine: New Essays*, ed. Paolo Leonardi and Marco Santambrogio, 206–228. Cambridge University Press.
- Soames, Scott. forthcoming. "Propositions". New York: Routledge.
- Speaks, Jeff. forthcoming. "On Possibly Nonexistent Propositions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- . ms. "On Possibly Nonexistent Propositions."
- Turner, Jason. 2005. "Strong and Weak Possibility," *Philosophical Studies*, 125: 191-217.
- . 2010. "Fitting Attitudes De Dicto and De Se," *Nous*, 44: 1-9.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 2004. "A Theory of Properties," *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 1: 107-38.
- Williamson, Timothy. 2001. "Necessary Existents". *Logic, Thought, and Language*: Cambridge University Press.