

**Critique of Two Views:  
Propositions as Properties  
Propositions as Facts**

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**Chapter 9**  
***New Thinking about Propositions***  
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## 1. Propositions as Properties

I begin with a friendly amendment. According to Speaks (p.5) the proposition expressed by ‘Amelia talks’ is the property: *being such that Amelia instantiates talking*, which is also the semantic content of the predicate ‘is such that Amelia talks.’ Since the predicate is complex, its content should be a structured complex of the contents of its grammatical constituents. This suggests that the content of ‘Amelia instantiates talking’ – namely, *being such that <Amelia, talking> instantiates Instantiation* – should be included in the content of ‘Amelia talks’. Since we don’t want this, Speaks should drop *instantiation*, and identify the content of ‘Amelia talks’ with *being such that Amelia talks*, while treating ‘is such that’ as a syncategorematical element that turns sentences into predicates without adding an extra constituent to the content.

Speaks motivates his view, in part, by noting:

“believing a proposition 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.” (p. 6)

There is something right about this, but it doesn’t favor the view that propositions are properties (of the sort he has in mind). The claim that believing a proposition is taking the world to be a certain way approximates the more discriminating claim that believing a proposition is taking something (or things) to be a certain way (or ways). Sometimes the thing so taken is the entire universe, but often it’s not. To believe that *o* is red is to take *o* to be a certain way, which involves taking a certain stance toward a property. To believe the proposition is to (be disposed to) predicate redness of *o*, thereby representing *o* as red (while endorsing that predication). In

this way, we can accommodate Speaks' truism without taking the properties he identifies to be the things believed.<sup>1</sup>

For Speaks propositions are a certain kind of property, and truth is instantiation. This makes it difficult to capture the fact that truth is a kind of accuracy in representation. A map or portrait is *accurate*, or *veridical*, when it represents its subject matter as being how it really is; a proposition is *true* when it represents things as they really are. This parallel seems to be lost when propositions are identified with properties that, as Speaks admits, aren't intrinsically representational.(p. 7) Unless he can identify some sense in which they are representational, he will lose the pretheoretic connection between truth and accuracy.

Just as believing *that so-and-so* involves taking (representing) things to a be certain way, so does doubting/denying/imagining *that so-and-so*. Since all are attitudes to the same proposition, there is a sense in which all involve taking things to be the same way. However, since agents who *believe*, *deny*, *doubt*, or *imagine* that so-and-so have different takes on things, there is also a sense in which the ways they take things to be are different. Although both senses are legitimate, only the former is at issue when one asks "Is what is believed/denied/doubted/imagined true?" To ask this is to ask whether the way things are taken to be that is *common* to these cases is the way things really are. Capturing this common *way things are represented to be* requires either (i) taking propositions to be intrinsically representational independent of the attitudes of agents, or (ii) postulating an *ur-attitude* – like entertaining a proposition – that is both inherently representational and part of the characterization of the other attitudes. The former strategy, which Speaks correctly rejects, was that of the early Russell. The latter strategy is

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<sup>1</sup> My view of propositions as event types also accommodates Speaks' truism. I here leave it open whether event types might themselves be properties of events, or of agents (if they are identified with acts). Whatever one decides about that, propositions in my sense are not the properties with which Speaks identifies propositions.

central to my theory of propositions as cognitive event types. On my view, for an agent A to entertain the proposition that Amelia talks is for A to cognitively represent her as talking. A's act, and the event type of performing that act, represent Amelia as talking because agents who perform it do. Just as torturing someone is said to be a violent act because agents who do that are violent and events in which it is done are violent episodes, so predicating talking of Amelia, and the event type of so doing, may be said to represent Amelia as talking. From this we derive the truth conditions of the proposition. It is true at  $w$  iff *at*  $w$  Amelia is as she is represented to be by one who entertains it (at any world-state). If propositions are to be identified with properties of the world, Speaks must provide a similar story connecting truth, representation, and the attitudes.

*De se* attitudes are a special case. At first blush, Speaks' view that they are 2-place relations between an agent and a property might seem to hold promise in uniting the *de se* with the non *de se*. In the end, however, this seemingly promising idea founders on the evidently correct principle TB (true belief).

TB. A's belief is true iff what A believes is true.

Although those properties that are objects of ordinary beliefs are, on Speaks' account, true iff they are instantiated, this does not extend to putative objects of *de se* beliefs – like *being Rudolf Lingens* or *being in danger* – which aren't truth bearers at all. Nor, as he recognizes, does the property view of propositions provide a good way of retaining the *de se* and the non *de se* as *beliefs* in the same sense. Instead, he is forced to posit *another attitude* distinct from *belief* in order to capture what Lewis would call *belief de se*. (The same proliferation is required for other attitudes.) As I argue in chapter 6, there is no such problem when propositions are taken to be cognitive event types. Not only is TB preserved, but the relation between the *de re* and the *de se*

falls out automatically. On the cognitive account, concrete cognitive events in which an agent entertains a *de se* proposition are always simultaneously events in which the agent entertains the corresponding *de re* proposition (though the converse does not hold). From this it follows that both propositions are truth evaluable, and that believing the *de se* proposition guarantees believing its *de re* counterpart (but not vice versa). Far from facilitating a satisfying account of the *de se*, taking propositions to be the kind of properties that Speaks is an obstacle to giving such an account.

At the end of chapter 5, he raises two interesting problems for his own view of propositions that extend to other theories as well. The demarcation problem for his theory is to specify which properties are propositions and which are not. Having identified truth with instantiation of properties to which we bear certain cognitive attitudes, he needs to explain why other properties (to which we bear different but related cognitive attitudes) aren't true when they are instantiated. After considering some inadequate ways of drawing the distinction, he takes the problem to remain unsolved. The situation is different for propositions as cognitive event types. Although some open questions concerning demarcation remain, there is no fundamental problem explaining why certain event types have truth conditions and others do not. Those that have truth conditions are those that represent things as being one way or another, in virtue of the fact that they are event types in which agents perform acts that represent things, in part by predicating properties of predication targets. This is not the whole story because predication (which involves cognizing certain targets in one or another way) hasn't been fully specified, and because the range of other cognitive operations (including applying functions and performing certain function-like operations) hasn't been exhaustively explored. I think that enough has been done to justify optimism about future progress – though, of course, the proof will be in the pudding.

Speaks' other unsolved problem – the substitution problem – also generalizes to my theory. If Bob believes that Amelia talks, then for some  $x$ ,  $x$  = the proposition that Amelia talks and Bob believes  $x$ . Since, on my view, the proposition that Amelia talks = the cognitive event type in which an agent predicates talking of Amelia, it follows that for some  $x$ ,  $x$  = that event type and Bob believes  $x$ . Since this is what is expressed by

1. Bob believes the event type of predicating talking of Amelia.

this sentence is one of the truths we learn by doing philosophy. If Speaks continues to stand by his property theory, he should draw a similar conclusion about (2).

2. Bob believes the property of being such that Amelia talks.

This line of argument *does not* apply to (3) and (4).

3. Jeff fears that the Trojans will beat the Irish this year.
4. Jeff fears the proposition that the Trojans will beat the Irish this year.

The reason it doesn't is that 'fears' is ambiguous between a reading in which it combines with sentential clauses and one in which it takes a direct noun phrase object. Because of this (6) does not follow from (5).<sup>2</sup>

5. Jeff fears that so-and so.
6. There is an  $x$  such that  $x$  = the proposition that so-and-so and Jeff fears  $x$ .

## 2. Propositions as Facts

I agree with two tenets of King's view: that propositions represent things as being certain ways, and so have truth conditions, and that their intentionality is due to the intentionality of agents. But I don't fully understand his explanation of the second. It begins with the claim that sentence (7a) is the *fact* given in (7b), which consists in 'Michael' standing in a certain "sentential relation" to 'swims'. (p. 11)

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<sup>2</sup> Speaks raises this possibility, which he attributes to King.

- 7a. Michael swims.  
 b. the fact consisting in ‘Michael’ occurring as the left terminal node that is the daughter of a node that also dominates the right terminal node at which ‘swims’ occurs.

Let us call the relation in which ‘Michael’ stands to ‘swims’ in (7a/b) ‘R’. Next King identifies another fact, given by (7c), called “an interpreted sentence” (corresponding to (7a)).

- 7c. the fact consisting in there being a possible context of utterance *c* such that (i) Michael is the semantic value of ‘Michael’ in *c*, (ii) the property swimming is the semantic value of ‘swims’ in English, and (iii) ‘Michael’ stands in R, which in English encodes ascription (predication), to ‘swims’

(7c) includes quantification over possible contexts, while also including the English language, the man Michael, the property *swimming*, the notion *the semantic content of an expression relative to a context, R*, and the notion *encoding ascription*.<sup>3</sup> This was the view of King (2007); here, he modifies it, explaining how quantification over *possible* contexts can be eliminated in favor of quantification over assignments of objects to variables. Thus (7c’) replaces (7c).

- 7c’. the fact consisting in there being a context of utterance *c* and an assignment *f* of values to (individual) variables such that (i) Michael is the semantic value of ‘Michael’ relative to *c, f*, (ii) the property swimming is the semantic value of ‘swims’ in English, and (iii) ‘Michael’ stands in R, which in English encodes ascription (predication), to ‘swims’

The first crucial claim in King’s explanation of the intentionality of the proposition that Michael swims is the claim that speakers of English have “*cognitive access*” to the facts he calls interpreted sentences, including (7c’). (pp. 10-13). Next, he articulates a principle that allows him to conclude that speakers have *cognitive access* to propositions from the fact that they have *cognitive access* to interpreted sentences. Call a fact that consists simply of objects  $o_1 \dots o_n$  instantiating an *n*-place property *P* a *witness* of the related fact consisting in *there being some*  $x_1 \dots x_n P x_1 \dots x_n$ . King’s principle is that “having cognitive access to a witness for a fact is a way

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<sup>3</sup> For R to *encode ascription* is, I take it, for R to be used by speakers to *predicate* the property expressed by the predicate expression that stands in R to the term or terms in question, of the referents of those terms.

of having cognitive access to the fact witnessed.” (p13). His third claim is that (7c’) is a witness to the proposition (7d) that Michael swims.

7d. the fact consisting in there being *some language L, some expressions e and e’ of L, some syntactic relation R of L, and some context c and assignment f of objects to variables such that (i) Michael is the semantic value of e relative to c,f, (ii) the property swimming is the semantic value of e’ in L, and (iii) e stands in R, which in L encodes ascription (predication), to e’ in some sentence of L*

Although there is one further step needed to explain the intentionality of propositions, there are already some matters to attend to. First, (7c’) is *not* a witness of (7d), since the move by which we reach the latter from the former is *not* bare existential generalization (as the definition requires); it is more complex, explicitly introducing the notions of an *expression*, a *language*, and a *syntactic relation* of the language. Of course, ‘Michael’ and ‘swims’ are expressions, English *is* a language, and R *is* a syntactic relation (in which some expressions stand to others in sentences). But (7c’) doesn’t say that they are, so the move to (7d) imports content not found in (7c’). Since I suspect King would be happy to add this content to (7c’), I will here take that to have been done. Second, although (7d) speaks of *some language*, more is needed to ensure the existence of propositions in which properties not expressed by a predicate of any existing language are predicated of objects. This may be done either by adding quantification over all *possible languages* to (7c’) and (7d) (in a manner analogous to the treatment of contexts King (2007)), or by invoking assignments of properties to predicate variables in actual languages (in a manner analogous to the use of assignments of objects to individual variables). Let this also be assumed.

These are matters of detail. The serious questions are *What kind of cognitive access is King talking about?* and *Is the witness principle true for that kind of access?* Suppose (i) that “cognitive access” to *the fact consisting in such-and-such being so-and-so* involves knowing or



believing *that such-and such is so-and-so*. Then the witness principle will follow from the claim that when one knows or believes *that*  $Po_1..o_n$ , one also knows or believes that *that for some*  $x_1..x_n Px_1..x_n$ , plus the principle (ii) that one who knows or believes the latter thereby has “cognitive access” to *the fact that for some*  $x_1..x_n Px_1..x_n$ . Although this story might sound plausible, I doubt it is King’s view. For one thing, he is highly skeptical of the idea that *that the proposition that S* (which can be known or believed) is the same as *the fact that S* (which he seems to suggest cannot). But without this identity the story requires further explanation, which he doesn’t give, in order to be plausible. Worse, it is implausible to suppose that fledgling language users mastering simple sentences like ‘Michael swims’ are acquainted with the “interpreted sentence” (7c’) in a way that depends on knowing, believing, or even imagining:

*that there is a context of utterance c and an assignment f of values to (individual) variables such that (i) Michael is the semantic value of ‘Michael’ relative to c, (ii) the property swimming is the semantic value of ‘swims’ in English, and (iii) ‘Michael’ stands in R, which in English encodes ascription (predication), to ‘swims’*

This is too complicated for neophyte language users; it also contains concepts – *context, assignment, semantic value, R, ascription* (i.e. *predication*), *English* – that such language users cannot be assumed to possess. More importantly, the fact that belief and knowledge are relations to *propositions* disqualifies them from playing a role in the explanation of how agents endow otherwise non-intentional facts with intentional properties by “interpreting” them. To take King’s “cognitive access” to presuppose propositional attitudes as prerequisites for such “interpretation” would be to destroy the explanation by assuming what is to be explained. Being aware of this, he doesn’t appeal to such attitudes, contenting himself with the unexplained phrase “cognitive access.” To my mind, this trades one problem for another. Although *cognitive access* is central to his explanation, the notion has been left too underspecified to bear the load placed on it.

Setting this aside, we have reached the stage of the explanation at which speakers have *cognitive access* to the general metalinguistic fact (7d). Somehow “cognitive access” to this extraordinarily complex fact is supposed to lead fledgling speakers to “interpret” the relation  $R^*$  expressed by the following formula.

$\lambda xy$  [there is *some language L, some expressions e and e' of L, some syntactic relation R of L, and some context c and assignment f of objects to variables such that (i) x is the semantic value of e relative to c,f, (ii) y is the semantic value of e' in L, and (iii) e stands in R, which in L encodes ascription (predication), to e' in some sentence of L]*

$R^*$  is a complex two-place relation that holds between *Michael* and *swimming*, if (7d) is a fact. Since King identifies (7d) with the proposition that Michael swims, he calls  $R^*$  “the propositional relation.” The idea is, in effect, to treat the fact (7d) as a kind of *pseudo sentence* made up of two *pseudo words*, the man Michael and the property swimming, standing in the *pseudo grammatical relation*  $R^*$ . As always, “grammatical relations” carry *semantic significance*. Just as the real grammatical relation  $R$  is used by English speakers to predicate the property expressed by a predicate expression  $P$  of the items designated by  $P$ s argument expressions, so the *pseudo grammatical relation*  $R^*$  is used by anyone who entertains the proposition to predicate swimming of Michael. For King, this is what it is to *entertain* the proposition that Michael swims. In short, in King’s view as in mine, the proposition represents Michael as *being one who swims* because agents who *entertain* it do so.

Although I find this high-level agreement between King and me to be satisfying, I worry about his account of entertaining a proposition. The account begins with the problematic claim that by virtue of understanding (7a) we have *cognitive access*, in some robust but unexplained sense, to what King calls “the interpreted sentence,” which is the fact (7c’). Since (7c’) specifies which expression plays the referring role, and which the predicating role, while further indicating the property predicated and the object that is its predication target, this “cognitive access”

presumably involves understanding the sentence (7a) as predicating *swimming* of Michael. Step 2 gets us from “the witness” (7c’) to the complex general fact (7d) to which it is claimed we also have the required “cognitive access.” Step 3 portrays us as picking out the highly complex relation  $R^*$  and conceptualizing (7d) as consisting of Michael standing in  $R^*$  to swimming. Step 3 sees agents as undertaking, for some unknown reason, to endow this fact with intentionality by using it – pseudo-sentence/proposition to represent something else – Michael – as being a certain way – a swimmer -- in the way that parallels their use of the ordinary sentence (7a) to do the same thing.

Not only is there no explanation of why agents do this, it is anomalous that anything of this sort should be required. Merely understanding (7a) – *which, on King’s account, is analytically prior to any of his further steps* – involves agents using the sentence to predicate *being one who swims* of Michael. One who does this represents him as a swimmer and hence *thinks of him as one who swims* – which surely is itself a propositional attitude. Thus, one who understands the sentence (in King’s sense) *should be seen as already bearing a propositional attitude of the most basic kind* to the proposition that Michael swims. To understand the situation in this way is to recognize that making sense of the very first step in King’s putative explanation involves *presupposing* that agents bear propositional attitudes to the proposition whose intentional properties he sets out to explain. Since this presupposes some other, conceptually prior, way of entertaining the proposition that Michael swims, it seems to me that his explanation fails.

King must not see it this way. Perhaps he takes the first step in the process – namely as understanding the sentence, in the sense of having “cognitive access” to (7c’) -- as *not* involving one’s predicating anything of Michael, *not* representing him as one who swims, and hence as *not*

entertaining, or bearing any attitude, to the proposition that he swims. How this can be so is a mystery to me. Since the agents in question use and understand the sentence which, in effect, tells them to predicate swimming of Michael, I would have thought that their understanding the sentence and “cognitive access” to (7c’) would already have them thinking of Michael as a swimmer – and hence as entertaining the proposition that he is, independent of any explanatorily downstream “interpretation” of the “propositional fact” (7d). Since, by contrast, King thinks such interpretation is required, the final step in his journey is to argue that once agents have embarked on interpreting the propositional fact and relation, there is only one reasonable way for them to do so. He says:

“But even if we are now convinced that it is [7d]’s propositional relation that we interpret as ascribing the property of swimming to Michael, we need to say what constitutes interpreting it...It is simply that we compose the semantic values at the terminal nodes of the propositional relation in the way that we do. [Note the treatment of the fact (7d) as a kind of pseudo sentence and the relation R\* as a pseudo grammatical construction.] In the end this is just a reflex of the sentential relation R having the semantic significance that it does [i.e. ascription/predication]. When we entertain a proposition, we work our way up the propositional relation, combining semantic values to yield new semantic values for further combining. [Again propositions as pseudo sentences.] ... In the case of [7d], *were we to do anything other than ascribe the property of swimming to Michael, we would not be combining semantic values in a manner that is consistent with the way we interpret the syntax of the sentence [7a]. It just isn’t coherent to interpret the sentential relation R as ascribing the semantic value of ‘swimming’ to the semantic value of ‘Michael’, while composing the semantic values Michael and the property of swimming in some other way as one moves up the propositional relation of [7d]* Semantic values only get composed once in understanding sentence [7a], and hence entertaining the proposition [7d]. *We either do so in a way dictated by the sentential relation R or not. To do so in the way dictated by the way we interpret the sentential relation R just is to interpret the propositional relation as encoding ascription.* To summarize, [the proposition 7d] has truth conditions because speakers interpret its propositional relation as ascribing the property of swimming to Michael.” (13-14, my emphasis)

The sentences emphasized in the passage make it sound as if there are two (simultaneous?) interpretations going on here (running in parallel?) – one of the sentence, which involves the sentential relation R, and one of the proposition, which involves the propositional relation R\*.

The two are brought into harmony by the need for consistency, which dictates that the latter agrees with the former. My problem is that I don't understand the need for the apparent duality in the first place, in which a pair of interpretations must be brought into harmony. By King's own account, his elaborate construction requires some conceptually antecedent understanding of the *sentence* to provide the facts needed to construct the *proposition* the interpretation of which must be made consistent with the conceptually prior understanding of the sentence. If, as I believe, this understanding of the sentence already requires one to bear an elementary attitude (entertaining) to a, or the, proposition that represents Michael as a swimmer (and nothing more), then, what is to be explained is presupposed at the first step. Perhaps King will explain where precisely, and why, he disagrees.

In addition to this worry, there is a further, elementary point to be emphasized. However "interpreting," and hence entertaining, propositions is ultimately explained, King is committed to the idea that it always involves understanding sentences. For me, this is too logo-centric. There are many actual and possible agents, including human beings, who bear propositional attitudes to propositions presented to them in perception and non-verbal thought that seem not to be presented to them by any spoken or written sentence they understand. Although some philosophers may be tempted to speculation about the "languages of thought and perception" of *all possible agents* with perceptions, beliefs, desires, and expectations, one's theory of propositions shouldn't force one to this extremity.<sup>4</sup> I will return to a related point below.

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<sup>4</sup> The point is not to *deny* that predications that occur in perception or "non-verbal" thought are constituted by the agent's use of an internal language-like representational system some elements of which designate the predication targets while other elements designate the properties predicated. The point is to remain neutral on such speculation. I certainly believe that some instances in which natural language users predicate properties of objects are constituted by the agents' use and understanding of the natural language expressions they employ. However, I neither assert nor deny that all predications of properties, and instances of entertaining propositions, are similarly constituted by the agent's employment of an internal representational system that mediates between the propositions entertained and their worldly subject matter.

The critique offered here is, of course, directed at King's claims that agents' use and understanding of language is *explanatorily* prior to their attitudes to propositions, and to their endowment of propositions with intentionality. In an earlier exchange between us I took the presence of passages like the following from King (2007) to pose a *temporal* problem as well.

“Consider *the time at which sentences like ‘Rebecca swims’ first came into existence...*As should now be clear, the existence of sentences such as [this] brings into existence facts such as 4b’’ [that bear the same relation to ‘Rebecca swims’ as (7d) bears to (7a)] where, let us suppose the propositional relation *doesn’t yet* encode the instantiation function [now called ‘ascription’] but the sentential relation of ‘Rebecca swims’ does. Since we now claim that the propositional relation encoding the instantiation function [ascription] is part of the fact that is the proposition that Rebecca swims, 4b’’ *is not yet that proposition. Thus it must be that the language does not yet contain verbs of attitude, modal operators, or that-clauses.* However, sentences have truth conditions...As verbs of attitude enter the language speakers *begin* to talk about structured contents...In short, when English came into existence and *prior to it having the resources to talk about propositions*, it brought into existence facts like 4b’’...As speakers *began* to attempt to talk about structured contents by means of that-clauses, they implicitly took these contents to have the same truth conditions as the sentences with those contents... Perhaps it was indeterminate *at first* which eligible facts are the structured contents of sentences. But the facts that *in the end* are most eligible to be structured contents, propositions, must share the truth conditions of the sentences whose contents they are eligible to be...”<sup>5</sup>

On this basis, I interpreted King as implausibly claiming that there was a time *before propositions existed* when speakers used and understood sentences of primitive languages (without modal operators, attitude verbs, or that-clauses). Since this seems clearly in line with the words just quoted, I was surprised to read that he now claims my earlier interpretation was a misunderstanding. Nevertheless, I am pleased with what seems to me to be his change in view.

However, as he notes in chapter 4 above, there is still a temporal problem to be faced. Languages are cognitively complex social institutions. To speak and understand them, agents must have beliefs and intentions about expressions and what they are used to talk about. They must also have beliefs and expectations about what other agents know and what they don’t, as

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<sup>5</sup> King (2007) pp. 60-61 (probably 67-67) my emphasis. See also the paragraph spanning pp. 66-67.

well as what is of interest to them and what isn't. Speakers need further beliefs and expectations about how their hearers will interpret their words, and how well they will read the speakers' beliefs and intentions. Because of this, there is, I think, no speaking a language by agents who don't *first* possess a rich store of propositional attitudes. This was a problem for King (2007). Since the existential quantifiers used in specifying the facts with which he identified propositions did *not* range over the nonexistent, the existence of propositions at *t* depended on the existence of one or more languages at *t*. From his account of what it is to entertain a proposition it further followed that no one can *entertain* a proposition at a time when it doesn't exist. Thus, he was forced to the implausible suggestion that there were no propositions or agents with propositional attitudes before there were languages.

Recognizing the language-of-thought hypothesis as a possible way out, he rightly did not rest his case on it, and so admitted that we must take seriously the idea "that strictly speaking our proto-linguistic ancestors did not have propositional attitudes because propositions didn't exist then."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, he suggested that "they had some sort of "*proto-intentional states*": *proto-beliefs* and *proto-intentions*."<sup>7</sup> Summing up, he put his tentative conclusion as follows:

"Propositions and real intentional states with propositional content come into existence together. Hence we need not suppose that our proto-linguistic ancestors literally had propositional attitudes prior to the existence of language and propositions. It is enough to suppose that they had proto-intentional states not too different in kind from those had by many animals today."<sup>8</sup>

As I said in our earlier exchange, I don't find this convincing. Whatever these "proto-intentional states" are, they can't be relations to representational bearers of truth conditions, lest they raise the same problems that genuine propositional attitudes do. If the postulated primitive

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 66

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 66, my emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

states are not relational in this way, we need to be told: how, if at all, they are representational, and how, if they are not, they provide the rich conceptual resources necessary to give birth to language. Whereas I don't think this can be done, King argued that it must be possible since everyone faces a version of the same problem.

“[E]ven if propositions existed eternally, there was a time at which no creatures had mental states with propositional content. Hence, some account must be given of how creatures came to have propositional attitudes. If we consider creatures immediately prior to the time when creatures had propositional attitudes and creatures who first had them, some explanation will have to be given of how the latter managed to get in cognitive contact with propositions. But in sketching such an account one is faced with the challenge of describing the minds of our ancestors without using verbs of propositional attitudes. Here again it seems one would have to invoke proto-intentional states and proto-intentional action as part of the explanation, *just as I did above*. Hence, on this score my account is not in any worse shape than an account of which propositions are eternal.”<sup>9</sup>

I don't think this is quite right. From my perspective, King's focus on language as the loci of propositions led him to misconceive the problem. The cognitive requirements required to speak and understand even a very simple language are complex. Because of this, antecedent propositional attitudes are required to explain both the birth of language and the way children acquire it. It was because King denied this, while tying propositional attitudes to understanding sentences, that he was confronted with a puzzle. How can agents have the complex cognitive abilities needed to master a language, *and thereby come to have propositional attitudes*, without having the attitudes to begin with? His 2007 answer embraced the *deus ex machina* of “proto-beliefs” and “proto-intentions,” which somehow have just the power needed for agents to master language, and so to acquire propositional attitudes, without having whatever features of propositional attitudes that make understanding a language necessary for having them. The suggestion that we all face this sort of puzzle is simply not true.

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<sup>9</sup> P. 67, my emphasis.



On my account, all thought and perception involves propositional attitudes. Consider vision. To see something is to see it as being a certain way (e.g. as red, round, etc.) – which on my story is to represent it as being so-and-so by virtue of predicating the property *being so-and-so* of it. Since this is one of the basic ways of entertaining a proposition, any creature that can see has propositional attitudes. The same can be said of nonverbal thinking. To think of something is to think of it as being a certain way, which is to represent it as being that way by virtue of predicating a property of it. This too, is to bear an attitude to a proposition. Hence, nonlinguistic agents capable of perception and cognition may, depending on their capacities, bear cognitive attitudes to more or less conceptually rich sets of propositions. This, I maintain, is what makes it possible to explain the birth and acquisition of language.

For this reason, I am pleased to see the big step King takes in this direction with the following words from chapter 4.

“I believe that many things have content other than sentences of natural languages. Maps, diagrams, perhaps pictures and, most importantly for present purposes, perceptual experiences have contents. In the case of each sort of thing that has content, there will be an account of those contents in the spirit of the present account of the contents of natural language sentences ... it is plausible to suppose that the contents of perceptual experiences have truth conditions. Finally it seems reasonable to suppose that the contents of perceptual experiences can be objects of attitudes like belief, desire, etc. But then our prelinguistic ancestors could have had beliefs and desires whose objects are the contents of perceptual experiences. These attitudes could then figure in the account of how language, and the contents of natural language sentences came into existence.” (22-23)

Because his new views concerning types of contents/propositions not tied to language haven't yet been presented, no serious assessment of them can now be made. There is, however, a worry to be registered. Since his account of propositions expressed in language ties them, and attitudes we bear to them, so completely to sentences and our cognitive relations to them, it seems likely that the class of propositions to which we are, on his approach, related by visual experience will be entirely disjoint from the class of linguistically expressed propositions. The same, I suspect,

can be said about the class of linguistically expressed propositions and the class of propositions to which we are related by nonverbal thought (if he also recognizes these). This has the potential for creating problems for the account of how sentential clauses are used to report the contents of perceptual and cognitive experiences. It may also create problems for explaining the ways in which language users effortlessly integrate the propositional information brought to them through language, perception, and nonverbal cognition. For these reasons, I suspect it is a mistake to start with a thoroughly linguistic account of propositions expressed in language, with the hope grafting on later accounts of those with which we are nonlinguistically acquainted. Instead, I prefer to start with a notion of propositions not tied to any single mode of presentation, and to work for further specification from there. Time will tell which of these research programs is the more successful.

King closes chapter 4 discussing an objection in my earlier article “Propositions” that took it for granted that facts in his sense are things that can be referents of [the fact that S]. He says that this was a mistake, indicating that what he then meant (and now means) by ‘fact’ is “n objects standing in an n-place relation, n properties standing in an n-place relation, and so on.” (King p.30) On this understanding – which indeed is what I took him to mean – *Annie’s being smart* qualifies as a fact, as does *Jeff’s being different from Scott*. These, I assumed, were regarded as complex entities the existence of which were taken to make the propositions *that Annie is smart* and *that Jeff is different from Scott* true. Taking it to be obvious that [the fact that S] designates a fact, if it designates anything at all, I assimilated *Annie’s being smart* and *Jeff’s being different from Scott* to *the fact that Annie is smart* and *the fact that Jeff is different from Scott* – thereby reaching the familiar conclusion that *the fact that Annie is smart* and *the fact that Jeff is different from Scott* are what philosophical defenders of facts take to make *the*

*propositions that Annie is smart and that Jeff is different from Scott* true. (King p.29-30) If I now understand him correctly, it is this last step that he disputes, when ‘fact’ is taken as he understands it. Though he doesn’t deny it – either now or in King (2007) – he doesn’t affirm it either. This being so, the argument to which he objects was based on a premise to which he was not committed.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, in chapter 4 above he is, for the sake of argument, willing to assume that [the fact that S] does designate a fact, while providing evidence that even so, what it designates is different from what [the proposition that S] designates. It is good that he does this, because the constructions he considers in attempting to establish this conclusion support, by and large, the substitutability of [so-and-so’s being such-and-such] and [the fact that so-and-so is such-and-such] for one another – which, on his methodology, supports the substantive view that he complains my misunderstanding forced on him. Viewed in this light, his response is an attempt to provide precisely the empirical evidence my objection requested.<sup>11</sup>

His evidence consists in the problematic results of substituting one of [the fact that S] and [the proposition that S] for the other, or for substituting either for [that S], under various verbs. In many cases such substitution changes meaning, truth value, or grammaticality. Although King is cautious about interpreting these results, he is right to suggest that, taken at face value, they do make a *prima facie* case for distinguishing the referents of [the proposition that S] from those of [the fact that S], while taking [that S] to be capable of designating those of either. To that extent, his examples provide a reasonable response to my earlier objection.

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<sup>10</sup> In footnote 30, p. 149 of King (2007), to which he directs us in chapter 4, he says “I am not assuming that expressions of the form ‘the fact that p’ designate what I have called facts throughout the book. It is a substantive claim that they do so. I will remain neutral on that question here. But I shall call the things that they designate ‘facts’ in this chapter and assume that they are not propositions.” I am afraid I picked up his usage in the text while overlooking this footnote.

<sup>11</sup> The reader is invited to make such substitutions in (4a-f) and (8b) of chapter 4.

Nevertheless, I remain uncertain what facts are supposed to be, and what relation they bear to propositions. I am also troubled by the observation that his substitution tests can cut in directions different from those he indicates; as they do with a vengeance when one of the designators, K1 – K4 (of what he takes to be the proposition that Michael swims) is substituted for ‘the proposition that Michael swims’ or for ‘that Michael swims’ in examples (8a,b,c)

- K1. there being *some language L, some expressions e and e’ of L, some syntactic relation R of L, and some context c and assignment f of objects to variables such that (i) the property swimming is the semantic value of e in L, (ii) Michael is the semantic value of e’ relative to c,f and (iii) e stands in R, which in L encodes ascription (predication), to e’ in some sentence of L*
- K2. Michael’s standing in the relation *there being some language L, some expressions e and e’ of L, some syntactic relation R of L, and some context c and assignment f of objects to variables such that x is the semantic value of e relative to c,f, y is the semantic value of e in L, and e stands in R, which in L encodes ascription (predication) to e’ in some sentence of L to the property swimming*
- K3. the fact that there is a context c and assignment f of objects to variables such that Michael is the semantic value, relative to c and f, of some expression e of some language L, the property of swimming is the semantic value of some expression e’ of L, and e stands in R, which in L encodes ascription (predication), to e’ in some sentence of L
- K4. the fact that Michael stands in the relation *there being some language L, some expressions e and e’ of L, some syntactic relation R of L, and some context c and assignment f of objects to variables such that x is the semantic value of e relative to c,f, y is the semantic value of e in L, and e stands in R, which in L encodes ascription (predication) to e’ in some sentence of L to the property swimming*
- 8a. Fred believes (the proposition) that Michael swims.
- b. It is likely that Michael swims.
- c. That the moon causes the tides is true.

These substitutions produce apparent absurdity. Does this show that the fact designated by K1 – K4 really *isn’t* the proposition King takes it to be? If not, why do the changes rung by the substitutions he mentions in his examples (4-8) show that [the proposition that S] and [the fact that S] designate different things? As I said in connection with Speaks’ discussion of the substitution problem, a theorist like King will have to accept some of the seemingly absurd

results of substitution as *true* (if the unproblematic sentences into which they are substituted are true). This contributes to my uncertainty about what the results of substitution in his examples (4-8) really show.

I am similarly unconvinced by his rebuttal of my example (9), which appears to indicate that what is regretted – namely *the fact that Pam is pregnant* – is sometimes believed, and hence is nothing more than *the proposition that Pam is pregnant* (contra King).

9. Pam regrets *that she is pregnant*. Although her parents don't realize *it* yet, in time they will come to believe *it*.

King mentions two ways of accommodating this data. The first, derived from Parsons (1993), takes the *antecedent* of the occurrence of 'it' in the final clause to be an occurrence of '^[Pam is pregnant]' in the complex singular term 'c^[Pam is pregnant]' that is the object of 'regret'. The first of these designates the proposition that Pam is pregnant, while the second designates the fact that Pam is pregnant – which the function designated by 'c' assigns as value to the proposition as argument. Thus, King concludes, the truth of (9) can be made compatible with the distinctness of the fact from the proposition.

This strikes me as too quick. Although the explanation requires there to be a complex term for the fact in a position in which its argument expression can serve as the antecedent of a later pronoun, this is an accidental feature of the example chosen. For example, consider (10)

- 10a. Pam regrets something that her parents don't yet realize, but will soon come to believe.  
 b. Something Pam regrets is now merely suspected by her parents, but will soon be believed by them.

Not only do these seem fine, they seem to entail that some one thing can be both regretted and believed, or both regretted and suspected. It also seems obvious that the same things that can be known can, and are, believed – despite the fact that King takes belief to require propositions as

objects, while seeming to take examples like (11) (his (4c)) to show that the objects of knowledge are the non-propositional referents of clauses [the fact that S].

11. The fact that the moon causes the tides is well known.

Thus, there is much more here to explain.

King's second strategy for accommodating (9) is based on (12).

11. The book I just stole from the library is on my desk. It was written in 1801 and has been translated into many languages.

According to King, the antecedent of 'it' is the occurrence of 'the book I just stole from the library' in the first sentence, which he takes to designate a concrete object – a copy of said book – while 'it' designates the abstract object itself. This is taken to show that antecedents and anaphors can refer to different but related things, which, he thinks, is how (9) may be understood. Again, I am skeptical. I may truly remark "*The book I stole from the library that is now on my desk is the same as the book Mary stole from her library that is now on her desk.*" Here I am talking about a book type – e.g. *War and Peace* – which is both sitting on my desk, and sitting on Mary's, having been stolen by each of us from our respective libraries. What this illustrates is also at work when one says that one wrote the same word on the board twice on separate days. Abstract objects can have properties – like being written on the board, being on a desk, being stolen from the library, and the like, by virtue of properties had by their tokens. Thus, the definite description in (12) can be understood as denoting the book itself, rather than a copy of the book, even though the book is truly said to be sitting on the desk (by virtue of the fact that the copy is).

This completes my critical remarks. Despite the inconclusive sparring over the referents of [the fact that S], [the proposition that S] and [that S], the crucial points in my discussion of King's chapter 4 are the challenges I pose for his explanation of the intentionality of

propositions, and my related concern that he ties the propositions expressed by sentences, and the attitudes we bear to them, too closely to those sentences and our understanding of them. Despite these points of disagreement, I am pleased that King now recognizes propositions expressed by pictures and diagrams, and that he takes perceptual experience to have propositional content. These additions expand the broad areas of agreement between our two views, both of which remain works in progress.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Brian Bowman for helpful comments on this chapter.