

Scott Soames
Yes, The Search for Explanation is All We Have

Thanks to Stephen Schiffer, Ben Caplan, and the audience at the Author Meets Critics session chaired by Trenton Mericks on *Rethinking Language, Mind, and Meaning* for their well informed and thought provoking comments.¹

Reply to Schiffer

I begin with Stephen's endorsement of Ostertag's suggestion that truth conditions of propositions are as unproblematic as instantiation conditions of properties. The suggestion is understandable, but it misses something important. Yes, the triviality of routine instances of the propositional T-schema – e.g. *the proposition that snow is white is true iff snow is white* approaches the triviality of routine instances of the instantiation schema for properties – e.g. *the property being white is instantiated by o iff o is white*. But the underlying question, *What sort of things must properties be in order to have instantiation conditions?* is itself trivial in a way in which the question *What sort of things must propositions be in order to have truth conditions?* is not. Properties are ways things are or could be – e.g., *being red* and *being round*. For a way something could be to be instantiated is for something to be that way – *red* or *round*. Agents have no role in this. Agents are, of course, acquainted with properties, often perceptually. We are perceptually aware, not only individual things, but also of ways things can be. We think *this thing is that way* – before we have any conception of properties or instantiation. There is no similarly obvious answer to the question *What must propositions be?* in order for them to have truth conditions and to play the role in our cognitive lives that they do.

¹ Eastern Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association on January 7, 2016.

There is, however, an obvious place to start. Philosophers often say that for a proposition to have truth conditions is for it to impose conditions the world must satisfy if the proposition is to be true. How do they do this? Perhaps, unlike properties, propositions *represent* things as being certain ways, and so are true iff the things represented are as they are represented to be. Other items about which we may say something similar include artifacts like sentences and stories, as well as cognitive acts or states like perceiving, visualizing, imagining, believing, asserting, and knowing. Agents themselves represent when in these states or performing these acts. When agent A represents object o as being F, A may do so accurately or not. There is a close connection between A's representing o as F and the truth conditions of the proposition *that o is F*. Since for an agent to *entertain* that proposition is for the agent to represent o as F, the proposition is true iff were one to entertain it, one would accurately represent o as it really is. In short, truth is connected to representation, which, in turn, is connected to accuracy. The truth conditions of other truth-bearing things – e.g., sentences and stories – are intimately tied to the truth conditions of propositions and the accuracy of agents who entertain them.

Demystifying truth conditions requires explaining how their bearers are connected to agents representing things in the required way. In philosophy we say that sentences inherit truth conditions from propositions they express. But what does that amount to? Not, I think, that one kind of abstract object, a sentence type, bears a *sui generis relation, expressing*, to an independent *sui generis* abstract object that primitively represents, and so has truth conditions. It's simpler than that. For a *sentence* S to express a proposition is for *uses of S* – i.e. acts of using S in specific ways – to represent things as being certain ways. The acts do this because they *are* propositions. If S *isn't* context-sensitive, its semantic

content is an act abstracted from the proposition that is *the act of using S in the prescribed way* – just as the act of traveling to work is, in effect, a determinable abstracted from its determinates, e.g., acts of driving or biking to work.² If *S* is context-sensitive, its semantic content is a function from contexts to these determinable propositional acts. Details aside, this is how sentences express propositions. Roughly put, for sentences to express propositions is for uses of sentences *to be* propositions and for an agent to learn a language is for the agent to use its sentences to perform the same propositions that others do.

The truth conditions of propositions themselves are derived from representational facts about agents who entertain, i.e. perform, them. I don't *define* what it is for you to represent an object we all see as white. I take it for granted that you do, and sketch various ways you can do it. To predicate, and thereby represent, is to cognize something as being some way. You can do this non-linguistically by perceiving, visualizing, or imagining the object as white, or linguistically, by using the words 'is white' to predicate whiteness of the referent of a name -- whether or not you've ever had non-linguistic contact with the object or property. Since these are ways of predicating the same property of the same thing, we learn more about this primitive representational relation by learning more about perception, about visualization, about imagination, and about linguistic cognition. That, it seems to me, is how naturalistic explanation should work. I haven't seen any comparable explanation arising from the view, (i) that *sui generis* propositions represent and (ii) that agents represent by cognizing such propositions in a primitive, unexplained way.

Stephen chides me for my exuberant rejection of propositions as set-theoretic constructions or other "inhabitants of a Platonic realm beyond mind and matter." He

² Soames (2015), pp. 23-25.

observes that properties, which I accept, are abstract, and hence are themselves inhabitants of the Platonic realm. But that's irrelevant. My interest in the metaphysics of propositions isn't motivated by skepticism about abstract objects; it is motivated by a search for explanation. Like numbers, sets, and properties, as well as all repeatable acts (act types), the cognitive acts I take to be propositions are abstract in the sense of not being spatio-temporally located particulars. The problem with traditional conceptions of propositions is not that they take propositions to be abstract, but that they provide no explanation of our knowledge of them, or of their central role in our lives – as objects of attitudes, contents of mental states, semantic contents of sentences, and primary bearers of truth and falsity.

Insisting that because propositions are *sui generis* they can be modeled, but never identified, merely reinforces the problem. Stephen agrees that no set-theoretic or other formal constructions can be propositions because, without interpretation by us, they can't be assigned truth conditions. But, he thinks, some of these constructions can model propositions, and models are all we need. I disagree. First, none of the models standardly given provide propositional identity conditions needed to accommodate ordinary propositional attitudes.³ Second, ordinary agents have no knowledge of, or acquaintance with, *theorists' models of propositions*. Because of this, theories that provide only models can't adequately model agents' knowledge of, or attitudes to, propositions the entertainment of which requires them to predicate properties and relations of propositions.⁴ Although one might try to escape this predicament by introducing the *unidentifiable things modeled* – i.e. real propositions --into one's theory, one would then have to explain why

³ These include sets of world-states, sets of centered states, sets of abstract situations, n-tuples of objects and properties, and collections of Fregean senses.

⁴ See chapter 5 of Soames (2010a) for a detailed discussion.

we should believe that there are any such theoretically elusive primitives to be modeled, and how, if there are, non-modelers, known as “ordinary agents,” manage to bear attitudes to, and acquire knowledge of, them. Finally, appealing either to models alone or to *sui generis* propositions misses an unexplored possibility. Perhaps there is a common source for both the seemingly intractable foundational problems of traditional propositional epistemology and the long-standing empirical problems with hyperintensionality in the philosophy of language and mind. Perhaps both are due to an inadequate metaphysics of propositions. If so, then a new metaphysics capable of dealing with foundational problems may open up novel solutions to empirical difficulties with hyperintensionality. The aim of my book is to show that this is so.

Next, I turn to a thesis Stephen attributes to me – namely, that *for an agent A to entertain a proposition p is for there to exist a property φ and object o such that A predicates φ of o*. This attribution needs a little cleaning up. I don’t require predication to be of a single object, nor do I assume objects must exist to be predication targets. As I have often argued, nothing blocks reference to, quantifying over, or predicating properties of, things that once existed but no longer do, things that don’t exist but will, and things that don’t exist but could have existed.⁵ Most importantly, I reject his assumption that we can’t predicate properties of things we haven’t heard of and can’t bring to mind. I reject that assumption because I distinguish *direct predication* from *indirect predication*.⁶

To *directly predicate* P of o is to have o in mind as what one represents as having P. One who perceives o, remembers perceiving o, or has a name for o can do this. Many

⁵ Pages 128-129 of Soames (2010b), pp. 62-64 of Soames (2014), and page 29 of Soames (2015).

⁶ Soames (2015), pp. 36-39.

agents can't *directly predicate* anything of Stephen's left ear. But they can *indirectly predicate* properties of it. They can even predicate properties of the largest prime number, despite the fact that 'the largest prime number' doesn't designate anything. To indirectly predicate P is to predicate *determining something that is P*, of an individual concept – a function/argument complex or property *being uniquely so-and-so* expressed by a complex singular term. Anyone who can use the '+' sign or a Fregean definite description can do this. In my book, I mention *indiscriminate predication* as a variant of *indirect predication* that employs, not an individual concept, but a general concept under which everything falls. To *indiscriminately predicate* P, is predicate *determining only Ps* of that concept.

This brings me to truth-functional operations. Applying them to propositions involving *direct predication* doesn't require indirect or indiscriminate predication. Here is one way to think of negation in such cases. To negate the proposition *that o is F* is to generate the property *being such that o is F* from it, to negate that property, and to predicate the result of o. Disjunction can be treated similarly. To disjoin *that a is F* and *that b is G* is to generate the properties *being such that a is F* and *being such that b is G*, to disjoin them, and to predicate the result of a and b. So if a propositional-attitude-bearing agent is incapable indirect or indiscriminate predication, it may still be capable of truth-functional cognition.

Stephen questions this. Suppose the proposition *that a is F or b is G* is the act of predicating Property 1 of a and b.

Property 1: *being such that a is F or b is G*

How, he asks, are we to understand the clause 'that a is F or b is G' in the name of that property? We can't say it designates the disjunctive proposition under analysis, since that

would invite a regress. When I sketched the analysis in the book, I took the needed 0-place property to be *a's being F or b's being G*, which can be identified with Property 2.⁷

Property 2: *being such that a is F or being such that b is G*

Regress is avoided by distinguishing the two properties. Property 1 is the non-disjunctive 0-place property derived directly from the disjunctive proposition *that a is F or b is G*. Property 2 is the disjunctive property derived by disjoining the 0-place properties parasitic on the propositions *that a is F* and *that b is G*.

Although predicating either property of anything can be seen as representing a as being F or b as being G (and only that), the properties are cognitively different. On the account given in the book, Property 1 is parasitic on Property 2. One makes use of the former when one negates the disjunctive proposition – *that a is F or b is G* -- that the latter property is used to construct. Negating this proposition involves generating Property 1 from it, negating the property, and predicating it of something – say a and b. Since if anything has Property 1 (or Property 2), then everything has it, one can take the proposition *that a is F or b is G* and its negation to involve either the direct predication of the relevant 0-place property of a and b, or the indiscriminate predication of that property of everything.

A similar story can be told for language-using agents capable of *indirect predication*. Consider the proposition that the largest prime number is odd. Since it represents the individual concept *being a prime number larger than other primes as determining an odd number*, we can generate from it the 0-place property *the individual concept's determining an odd number* –i.e. the property *being such that the individual concept determines an odd*

⁷ The brief discussion on pp. 31-2 fails to clearly distinguish the two properties, and at one place conflates them.

number. Negating this property gives us a property predication of which of anything represents the individual concept's *not determining* an odd number (and nothing more). The negative proposition can then be seen as predicating this 0-place property either of the individual concept, or of the universal general concept. Thus, I concluded, cognition of truth-functional compounds – whether by agents capable only of direct predication or by more sophisticated agents – doesn't require predicating anything of propositions, or predicating truth or falsity of anything. There is no regress here.

If one is worried about 0-place predicates, one can tell an alternative story without them. Let the disjunction of propositions *that a is F* and *that b is G* be the act of entertaining and operating on them to produce *a proposition*, not a property, that represents the pair a,b as standing in the 2-place relation $\lambda xy (Rxy)$ that consists of the first's *being F* or the second's *being G*. Doing this represents a and b as standing in this disjunctive relation (and nothing more), which is what it is to represent *a as being F or b as being G*. The negation of this proposition represents the pair as standing in the relation $\sim R$.

Next consider the disjunction of the propositions *that a bears P to c* and *b bears Q to d*, which is the act of entertaining and operating on the two propositions to produce a proposition that represents *the quadruple a, b, c, d* as standing in the 4-place relation $\lambda wxyz (Rwxyz)$ that consists of the first's bearing P to the third or the second's bearing Q to the fourth. We could equally well characterize this proposition as representing *the pair a, b* as standing in the 2-place relation $\lambda wy (Rwcyd)$ that consists in the first as bearing the relation P to c or the second as bearing Q to d. These are not different representational contents; they are different statements of the same representational content. There are, of course, various other statements of that same content. This is simply Frege's point about

different ways of conceptually dividing up a single representational content. On this account, in which truth functional operations map propositions onto propositions, truth-functional cognition of agents capable only of direct predication doesn't require predicating 0-place properties of anything.

The account generalizes to propositions *the so-and-so is F* and *the such-and-such is G*, which involve indirect predication. The disjunction of these propositions is the act of entertaining and operating on them to produce a proposition that represents the pair of individual concepts *the so-and-so* and *the such-and-such* as standing in the 2-place relation R^* that consists of the first's *determining an F* or the second's *determining a G*. An agent who performs this act represents the two concepts as standing in this relation (and nothing more). This is what it is to represent *the former as determining an F* or *the latter as determining a G*. The story is similar if one disjoins the proposition *o is F* (involving direct predication) and the proposition *the such and such is G* (involving indirect predication). The result is the proposition that represents the pair consisting of *o* and the individual concept *the such-and-such* as standing in the 2-place relation $R^\#$ that consists of the former as *being F* or the latter as *determining a G* (and nothing more). Thus the account of the truth-functional cognition—whether by agents capable only of direct predication or by more sophisticated agents—avoids regress without 0-place properties and without requiring agents to predicate truth or falsity of anything, or to predicate anything of propositions.

Since 0-place properties have become an issue, I will say a word about what I take them to be. One conception takes them to be propositions, whatever they are, while taking 0-place predicates to be sentences. That is not my conception. For me, properties are *ways*

for things to be, which are *true of* things that are that way. Propositions aren't such ways, nor are they *true of* anything. A second conception, the one I to which I adhere, derives 0-place properties from propositions. Just as we can abstract the properties expressed by 1 and 2 place predicates ' $\lambda x(Rax)$ ' and ' $\lambda xy(Rxy)$ ' from the proposition expressed by ' Rab ', so we can abstract the 0-place property expressed by ' $\lambda x(Rab)$ ' from it. Predicating this property of anything represents it as *being such that a bears R to b*, which I take to be a genuine way for things to be.⁸

Having sketched two non-circular accounts of truth-functional cognition, I won't here choose between them.

Response to Caplan

I now turn to Ben. In the book, I say that *propositional acts of representing things as being certain ways* themselves (derivatively) represent things as being those ways, because for agents to perform them is for agents to so represent. Ben questions this. He realizes that I don't say the same thing about every act A and property P. I don't claim that A will always have P (in a derivative sense) if performing A guarantees that an agent has P. Ben wants a principle delineating the cases in which acts possess the derivative property from the cases in which they don't. He seems to agree that *sometimes* a property P of agents who perform an act grounds the fact that the act they perform has P (in a derivative sense), while with other properties Q this isn't so. But he wants a principled explanation of this difference that vindicates my claim that *representing a as being F* is among the properties that project. Unsure of what, if any explanation, may be forthcoming, he suspects that even if *the essences* of the projecting properties might provide one, the need to appeal to *facts*

⁸ Thanks to Jeremy Goodman for a discussion of these issues.

about essences would rob my conception of propositions of an explanatory advantage over traditional conceptions, which themselves appeal to primitive facts about the representational essences of traditional propositions. Although I sympathize with Ben's search for a principle distinguishing the cases that project from those that don't, I don't see any serious explanatory threat in the offing.

First a clarification. When I say that the repeatable act (type) *representing a as F* itself represents a as being F, I'm not reporting pretheoretic talk about this act. I am not aware of any widespread, pre-existing ordinary talk about *acts of representing* as themselves representing – in the way that there is such talk about acts being vicious, irresponsible, stupid, insulting, thoughtful, brilliant or heroic. In these familiar cases, predicates that properly apply to agents in virtue of their doings are applied derivatively to the doings themselves, giving us a shorthand connecting the two. My suggestion is that theorists of language and mind who identify propositions with purely representational acts may usefully extend this paradigm to talk about representation.

Doubtless there is something about the act of *representing such and such as being so and so* that makes this extension reasonable even though a similar extension would not be reasonable for every act. Ben's main concern is, I take it, to find a principle that spells out when such extensions are natural and when they aren't. Although I applaud the attempt, it isn't central to my project. Consequently, I am happy, in this reply, to *stipulate* that my talk of representational acts, propositions, as themselves representing means nothing more than that agents who perform, i.e. entertain, them do. Thus, one can simply replace all talk of propositions representing with talk of agents who entertain them as doing so.

In that spirit I begin with a triviality: when agent A predicates F of o with the aim of accurately representing o, A succeeds iff o is F. Next, I advance the hypothesis that the act of representing o as F is a proposition which *is true* iff anyone performing it with the aim of accurately representing o would succeed. This hypothesis explains of our interest in the truth of propositions as deriving from our interest in the accuracy of certain of our own representations. I challenge defenders of traditional propositions to explain this connection equally well.

Consider Frege-Russell versions of the view of propositions as abstract *we know not whats*. Both take propositions to be made up of constituents. For Russell, objects and properties combine in unexplained ways. For Frege, *who-knows-whats* called “senses” somehow fit together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, despite being non-spatial. For both, the representational properties of propositions, in virtue of which they have truth conditions, are primitive. *Agents* are said to represent by bearing an unexplained *entertaining* relation to the *know-not-whats*. There are 4 mysteries here. How do constituents combine to form a proposition? How do propositions represent, and so have truth conditions? What is the entertaining relation holding between agents and propositions? How does standing in that relation explain agents’ representing things as being various ways?

According to the canonical traditionalist, there is no reductive explanation of what it is for propositions to represent things as being certain ways. Traditional propositions are *sui generis* entities that have truth conditions by virtue of being primitively representational. A proposition is true iff things are the way it represents them to be. Agents represent o as being F by entertaining the proposition that o is F. If that proposition is true, then they accurately represent o by entertaining and affirming it. Propositional representation aside,

the chief problem with these views is that they provide no account of what it is to entertain a proposition, which is presumably some way of cognizing it, or bringing it to mind. Without such an account, traditional views remain mysterious.

The same can't be said of the cognitive conception. According to it the *entertainment relation* is something everyone recognizes -- the performing relation that holds between agents and acts. The reason agents who entertain the proposition that *o* is *F* are correctly said to represent *o* as being *F* is given by the triviality that one who performs the act of representing *o* as being *F* represents *o* as being *F* -- a triviality on a par with the observation that one who performs the act of jumping jumps. So, whether or not I am right in taking it to be reasonable to speak of *propositions* as *derivatively representational*, I can use the representational properties of agents to demystify the truth conditions of propositions. When asked, why the proposition that *o is F* is the sort of thing that has truth conditions I can answer, *because (i) it is the act of representing o as F, affirmative performances of which by agents either accurately or inaccurately represent, and (ii) truth is defined in terms of accuracy.* By contrast, the traditionalist can account for the connection between propositional truth and the accuracy of agents' affirmative representations only by appealing to a mysterious *entertaining* relation over and above the primitive propositional *representing* relation. This give the cognitive conception of propositions a distinct explanatory advantage.

The question of how propositions can have truth conditions is only one of many explanations by the cognitive theory of propositions. Others include: How do agents who *can't* cognize propositions bear attitudes to them? How do agents who *can* cognize propositions acquire knowledge of them? How, if propositions are meanings, do agents

come to understand sentences with those meanings? How can propositions be representationally identical but cognitively distinct, as they must be, if variants of Frege's puzzle are to be solved by accommodating first-person, present-tense cognition, perceptual cognition, linguistic cognition, and recognition of recurrence? In the book, I argue that cognitive propositions provide explanatory answers to these questions that other conceptions of propositions don't. The resulting package supplies answers to foundational questions while expanding the empirical utility of propositions in our theories of mind and language. That, at any rate, is how I see things.

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