Against Propositional Substantivalism on Unity Worries[*]

Manuel García-Carpintero
LOGOS, Department of Philosophy
University of Barcelona
e-mail: m.garciacarpintero@ub.edu

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Abstract

Jeff King, Scott Soames, and Peter Hanks have recently advanced different substantive theories of propositions, to deal with several issues they have raised, in the vicinity of a concern with a long pedigree in philosophy, the so-called problem of the unity of propositions. The qualification 'substantive' is meant to contrast with 'deflationary' - roughly, views which reject that propositions have a hidden nature, worth debating about. If deflationary attitudes about propositions are on the right track, it is to be expected that substantive views generate a dilemma familiar in philosophy: their claims might be either interesting, but wrong, in creating spurious problems; or true, but trivial, in not going beyond what we already knew. After rehearsing in this light some critical points already in the literature against recent substantivalist proposals on propositions to deal with unity issues, I will offer a new argument of that same kind against Hanks' (2015) act-theoretic view, as recently developed by Recanati (2016), who provides required elaboration on Hanks' crucial notion of *cancellation*.

Keywords: propositions; unity of propositions; representational content; representational acts

1. Introduction

Unlike other concepts that philosophy has used from its earliest beginnings in formulating its proprietary set of questions (What *are* things ultimately (*made of*)? What do we *know*? What is a *good* deed, or a *good* work of art?), *proposition*, like *a priori knowledge* or *possible world*, are technical-theoretical notions that philosophers deploy to provide answers to such questions.

Here are the core features in the philosophical 'job description' for propositions – the theoretical roles that they are posited to play:[1]

- Objects/contents of attitudes like belief, speech acts like assertion, and perhaps others in each category;
- (Partial) meanings of utterances of declarative sentences, and perhaps others;
- Referents of 'that'-clauses;
- Bearers of truth and falsity, and the modalities of truth and falsity: necessity, possibility, probability (subjective or epistemic, objective or metaphysical);
- What gets assessed in determining the validity of arguments.

To properly perform these jobs, propositions should be sufficiently coarse-grained. Ideally, an English sentence like "Sophie loves Carl", and its translation into an SOV language like Turkish, or an ergative language like Basque or Geogian, should be ascribed the same proposition; this would afford an easy explanation, say, for why it is rational for a bilingual speaker who has

formed a belief in her English inner speech to assert it in its Basque translation for the benefit of her Basque audience. For related considerations, perceptual experiences (assuming that they have propositional contents, as they are claimed to do on many contemporary views) should be ideally assigned as content the same proposition as the perceptual beliefs they help to justify.[2]

Several writers, including King (2007), Soames (2010) and Hanks (2015), have recently advanced different substantive theories of propositions, to deal with several issues they have raised, in the vicinity of a concern with a long pedigree in philosophy, the so-called *problem of the unity of propositions*.[3] 'Substantive' here is meant to contrast with 'deflationary'. One might be skeptical of any substantive view about propositions on account of a general attitude about the theoretical posits of philosophy. This might be motivated by Yablo's (2014) "quizzical" attitude – the notion that there is no possible way that controversies among proponents of *prima facie* conflicting substantive ontologies can be adjudicated. Or instead by the view that such entities are posits of an "easy ontology" (Thomasson 2015) and, as such, hardly have a "hidden nature" worth investigating and debating about. Or the skepticism might be rather grounded on a deflationary attitude specific to the case of propositions; say, one motivated by the measure-theoretic perspective on their explanatory role promoted by Davidson, Perry, Stalnaker and others (Matthews 2007, 2011; see also Field 2016). Like numbers vis-à-vis quantitative properties, on this view propositions are just convenient resources used to represent through their relations semantic relations among the attitudes and acts to which they are ascribed. The disjunction here is of course not exclusive; the latter motivation might well just specify the former, more general one.

If skeptical attitudes about propositions are on the right track, it is to be expected that substantive views generate a dilemma familiar in philosophy: their claims might be either interesting, but wrong, in creating spurious problems; or true, but trivial, in not going beyond what we already knew. After rehearsing in this light some critical points against recent substantivalist proposals on propositions to deal with unity issues, I will offer a new argument of that kind against Hanks' (2015) view, as recently developed by Recanati (2016) in what I'll show are seriously required ways. The next section outlines the unity debates; in section 3 I present along the sketched lines previous criticisms of substantive views, and in section 4 I'll present my own objection to the Hanks'-Recanati's account.

2. Substantive vs. Deflationary Solutions to Unity Problems

A cluster of *unity of the proposition* problems exercised the founding fathers of Analytic Philosophy, following in the footsteps of a distinguished tradition traceable back to Plato's later dialogues. The gist of the problem is this: what is it that holds the constituents of a proposition together? As this way of framing it shows, the problem presupposes that we can somehow discern 'constituents' in propositions' – the scare quotes will be explained momentarily. In fact, as a number of writers have pointed out,[4] there are several different problems that have been discussed under the rubric 'the unity of the proposition'. Prominent among them is one that presents itself not just for propositions, but also for other allegedly complex entities like facts. This is what Eklund (2016) calls the *constitution regress* problem: what is the nature of the fact that *a* is an *F*? Assuming that object *a* and property *F* are its constituents, the fact cannot consist merely of them; because (assuming for convenience the fact to be a contingent one) *a* and *F* could exist without the fact that *a* is an *F* thereby existing. For the fact that *a* is an *F* to obtain, *a* must actually *instantiate F*. But adding *instantiation* to the constituents in the attempt to get at its true nature does not help; for, again, *a*, *F* and *instantiation* might exist without the fact thereby obtaining. The object and the property need, therefore, to *instantiate* instantiation … and now we have launched what seems like a *vicious regress* of a family of instantiation relations.

There is a parallel problem for propositions. It cannot be put in exactly the same way, because in the case of propositions the existence of their constituents might be thought to suffice for their existence. However, as said above, it was just for the sake of convenience that we considered a contingent fact. The more general worry is that the nature of a proposition (say, the proposition that Bert loves Alex) does not appear to be determined only by what its constituents are; for Bert, Alex, and the loving relation might constitute a different proposition, e.g., that Alex loves Bert – or they might constitute something else altogether, say, a mere collection, or a set, or a fact. The temptation to deal with this issue by positing a further constituent of the proposition – typically a relation organizing the previously assumed three constituents in the proper way – will land us in an apparently vicious regress analogous to the previous one.

Now, a deflationary attitude toward propositions suggests that these problems are created by the unjustified assumption that such entities (facts and propositions), like the theoretical entities posited in empirical science, have hidden natures of which we can provide substantive explanatory accounts. King (2016) makes precisely this assumption explicit when he says that the unity problems concern properties that "seem to call out for further explanation and whose possession seems as though it should be grounded in the possession of 'more basic' properties. It may be hard to give a criterion for being such a property, but properties like *being alive*, *believing that snow is white*, and *being morally good* seem to be examples of such properties". Against this, philosophers like Bealer (1998) and Merricks (2015) advance a 'quietist' or 'primitivist' view, opposing the project of providing full-blooded accounts. As I put it in previous work (García-Carpintero 2010, 288), propositional unity is a primitive fact to be regarded with Wordsworthian natural piety: i.e., respectfully taken as it is – like nature on Wordswoth poem – as opposed to ground it on something else. Or, as Lewis (1983, 352) puts it in a similar context discussing the related *Third Man*-like regresses: "Not every *account* is an *analysis*! A system that takes certain Moorean facts as primitive, as unanalysed, cannot be accused of failing to make a place for them. It neither shirks the compulsory question nor answers it by denial. It does give an account."

Against what we might call *bare deflationism* (like perhaps Bealer's and Merricks's), the deflationary attitude I want to promote about unity problems takes on explanatory concerns in their vicinity, and offers informative answers for them, while eschewing commitment to any substantive account of the nature of propositions. We can increase our understanding of Moorean facts that are to be taken as primitive by placing them within a wider net of interlocking concepts, some of which receive analyses or definitions. Even if *proposition*, *a priori knowledge* and *possible world* are theoretical kinds, we are certainly acquainted with the phenomena they are intended to categorize, and do have intuitions about them. In indicating how propositions are supposed to perform their theoretical roles, we can thus call our attention to features of the linguistic and mental representations – with which we are already familiar – to which their 'constituents' are ascribed, thereby addressing some of the unity concerns.

Liebesman (2015) nicely illustrates this point. Elaborating on previous work on Frege's theory of predication by Burge (2007) and Wright (1998), he distinguishes three views of the semantics of predicates in general, defending one of them. On the *entity* view associated with Frege, what semantically distinguishes predicates is the ('unsaturated') nature of the entities they designate. On a nominalism-friendly *matching* alternative associated with Davidson, predicates do not need to designate anything. The semantic role of a predicate in a sentence just consists in matching its arguments in the sentence with conditions for it to get a truth-value. On the *ascription* view that Liebesman defends, predicates do designate properties that can also be the referents of terms. But what semantically defines predicates is the *ascription relation* that they bear to their *designata*, distinguishable from the referring relation that terms bear to their referents by the role that the relation plays in matching properties and referents to truth-conditions and truth-values for the sentences in which terms and predicate co-occur (cf. also

Johnston 2006, 681-7, and Burge 2007, 600). This affords some further understanding of the relation that specifically puts together the 'constituents' of propositions, by linking it to semantic features of the terms contributing to the expression of propositions. However, as Liebesman (2015, 543, 551) grants, when it comes to accounting for the nature of propositions and facts, this is a pretty shallow sort of explanation, which will not satisfy the ambitions that King expresses; for it just assumes as given our previous familiarity with such relation unifying them.[5]

Liebesman's is thus a proposal that, while deflationary vis-à-vis the natures of propositions, does provide some illumination on the relevant issues, by appealing to properties of the representational states to which those propositions are ascribed. Hartry Field (1992, 322) makes a similar point about propositional truth-minimalism: "on most conceptions of proposition, the question of what it is for a proposition to be true is of little interest, […] what is of interest are the issues of what it is for an utterance or a mental attitude to be true (or, to express a truth or represent a truth)" (cf. also Lewis 2001, 602-3).

In this paper, I want to recommend the same *vehicle-first* attitude regarding a related *unity of the proposition* problem that has been discussed more prominently than the previous one in recent philosophy, which Eklund (2016) calls *the representation problem*. This is the alleged problem of explaining the representational properties of propositions, in particular their truth-aptness and their having truth-conditions. Although it should be distinguished from the previous issues for the sake of perspicuity, they are clearly related. As Davidson (2005, 82) puts it, "the judgment or sentence must in some way constitute a unity; its parts must fit together to produce something that can be true or false"; Liebesman (2015, 550) similarly says that "we may reasonably expect that any account of the unifying relations of propositions will help us to understand their truth-aptness". As predictable from the links between the issues, a deflationary attitude has also been regularly advanced toward this version of the problem: "the truth-value aptness of a proposition is at least a good candidate for belonging to the fundamental essence of a thing. But if this is so, the only legitimate reply … may consist not in a direct answer, but instead in a rejection of the question" (Schnieder 2010, 300). In what follows, I'll argue for a *vehicle-first* variety of this view, by favourably contrasting it with propositional substantivist accounts offered by King, Hanks and Soames.

But before going into that, I'll conclude this section by explaining the scare quotes placed so far around 'constituents'. On an influential account – still the default in contemporary semantics – propositions are sets of worlds, and these in turn are 'explained' by Stalnaker (1976) – famously only by 'magic', according to Lewis (1984) – as given by *ways* or *properties* the world might have. A deflationary take recommends adopting Stalnaker's view that propositions are just such properties.[6] Propositional properties might be considered finer-grained than the sets of worlds at which they are instantiated, and thus not identical to them, thereby dodging well-known difficulties with the identification of propositions with such sets. This further supports a deflationary take on the representation problem, for no substantive explanation should be expected for why properties apply to things: this is just what properties are, by their very nature.[7]

Now, propositions understood along these lines are not supposed to have constituents in any substantive sense, mereological or otherwise.[8] However, holders of these views might still envisage in their theories *singular* propositions, expressed by sentences with names or indexicals in them. They can deflationarily explain this in traditional terms, as propositions that are 'directly about' objects, though not in virtue of their properties. This, in its turn, will on this view be further taken to merely articulate, without in any way substantively explain, the intuitive contrast with the sense in which the propositions expressed by sentences with attributively used descriptions are nonetheless 'about' the entities satisfying the description, vis-à-vis the intended one in which those expressed when names or indexicals replace them are 'about' their referents. Stalnaker puts it thus: "what is it, on this picture, to believe a singular proposition – a proposition about an individual as it is in itself? One can correctly and aptly ascribe a *de re*

belief whenever one can give a correct and unambiguous characterization (in a given context) of the way the world is according to the believer by referring to a certain individual and saying that, in the world according to the believer, that individual is a certain way" (2009, 243).[9] So far I have been placing the term 'constituent' inside scare quotes to leave it open for deflationary views about propositional unity like these to nonetheless contemplate propositions that are, in a distinct sense, about particular objects. Propositions might also be said to have properties too as 'constituents' in this deflationary way, if one accepts Liebesman's compelling reasons for positing entities indicated by predicates in explaining their semantics.

3. Substantive Accounts and their Discomforts

Jeff King, Scott Soames, and Peter Hanks have produced influential work in recent years addressing the representation problem, aiming to provide substantive explanations. The three of them find it deeply puzzling that, as King (2016) puts it, "propositions have truth conditions, and so represent the world as being a certain way, by their very natures and independently of mind and languages". King thus dismisses primitivism. As shown above, he mentions properties like *being alive* as analogous cases for which we presume that there is a substantive account of their natures. He points out, "[s]entences, minds, maps, perceptual experiences all represent. And in each case we feel compelled to explain how/why such things manage to do this. Surely it would seem utterly mysterious to adopt the view that e.g. there is no explanation of how/why perceptual experiences represent things as being a certain why because that they do so is metaphysically basic." He then argues that, analogously, "we should think that same thing about the claim that propositions have truth conditions".

As we have seen, King grants that the primitivist line is justified in the case of propositions understood as sets of possible worlds, or as the properties the world might have determining them: "there need be no explanation of the fact that properties are instantiated or not by certain kinds of things". But deflationism finds no significant difference in this respect between theories of propositions in general and possible-world theories. King suggests one by describing the latter as "doing without representations", but this might be just terminological. From a deflationary perspective on propositions, they are only said to have intentional properties (to represent and to be about things) in a metonymically extended sense, i.e., the sense in which lion-statues are said to be fierce: one therefore derived from the core sense in which the mental states and linguistic items to which they are ascribed are intentional.[10] Given this, traditional propositions, King's propositions and propositions as properties could all either be considered representational in the extended sense, or denied the label on a more strict understanding. King, Soames and Hanks want not only to grant that the truth-conditional properties of propositions are essential to them, but also to take them to be seriously representational in so far as they obtain their truth-conditions from the activities of rational beings in the way that mental states and linguistic items come to have them. This combination of views is not easy to make sense of, as several writers have pointed out.[11]

Over the years, King has refined the Tractarian account that he provided in his 2007 book, on which the proposition expressed by "Rebecca swims" is a particular kind of fact, of course not the fact that would obtain if it was true: "that proposition is the fact of there being a context *c* and there being lexical items *a* and *b* in some language *L* such that *a* has as its semantic value in *c* Rebecca and occurs at the left terminal node of the sentential relation R that in *L* encodes the instantiation function and *b* occurs at R's right terminal node and has as its semantic value in *c* the property of swimming" (King 2007, 51). The proposition being a fact of this sort is supposed to significantly account for its representational properties.

In a recent presentation (King 2016), he discusses two objections. The first is that on this account propositions appear to be too fine grained to properly implement their job description. For instance, the sentential relation R involved in the propositional fact that King posits will surely differ in an English sentence like "Sophie loves Carl", and in its translation into an SOV language like Turkish, or an ergative language like Basque or Geogian. Now, in coming up with propositional facts like the one given for illustration above, King assumes that, say, particular lexical items are existentially quantified away. His proposal now has it that the specific syntactic relation that encodes ascription of the semantic value of the predicate to that of the arguments is also existentially generalized away in the facts constituting propositions.

A similar solution might be given for a second problem that King confronts. Remember that he wanted to steer clear of the perils of uncurtailed Platonism about these issues, by making the representational features of propositions mind-dependent. Thus, in elaborating on the nature of the propositional facts he posits, he has speakers *interpreting* the syntactic relation R so that it encodes ascription. This suggests a regress: *interpreting* appears to be a propositional attitude, requiring propositions with their own unity and representational features to be already around.[12] King's response is, in effect, that the interpreting he posits is a subpersonal affair. One might doubt, however, that this really solves the problem. The subpersonal states posited by cognitive scientists have propositional contents, which play a role in their performing their theoretical jobs. Thus, they posit inferential subpersonal processes, sensitive to the validity-making roles of the contents of the states involved. These contents appear to generate the same worries that exercise King, but they cannot be solved by appeal to syntax-involving facts. Or can they? Similar issues arise at the personal level, on the popular view that perceptual experiences have contents, which account for their rationalizing role vis-à-vis the beliefs they might give rise to.

Taking a cue from King's suggested solution to the first problem, we may think of extending his account to the contents of subpersonal states or perceptual experiences. We just need to assume that these states also have their own, perhaps idiosyncratic (perhaps 'iconic' in the latter case), quasi-syntactic relations, equally capable of encoding the ascription relation.[13] Propositions could then be highly abstract facts like the ones King ends up proffering, in which specific linguistic encoding relations have been existentially abstracted away; the same propositional facts of this abstract sort could now be expressed by experiential states, subpersonal states, and linguistic states.

Now, however, we can raise a rather obvious problem for King. As indicated at the outset, excessive explanatory ambitions in philosophy confront the dilemma of the purported explanations being either interesting, but highly problematic, or true, but trivial. The two problems just discussed show that King's original proposal falls on the first horn. For it would entail that the contents of perceptual states, and those of subpersonal states, are necessarily different from those of thoughts articulated by, say, SOV-languages sentences, as the latter differ from those of thoughts articulated by SVO-languages sentences. But this is highly problematic. We want propositions to be abstract entities that allow us to classify as having the same contents thoughts expressed in such different languages, so that – for instance – we can easily explain why the inference that a bilingual speaker makes with a thought expressed in Basque as premise and another expressed with its English translation as conclusion is valid. Similarly, it would be desirable that we can ascribe the same content to a perceptual experience and to a corresponding perceptual belief, so that we can provide an easy explanation for why one justifies the other.[14] Similar points apply to inferential relations linking subpersonal and personal states.

The outlined proposal to deal with these problems, however, appears to fall now squarely on the second horn of the dilemma: how does it improve on what the deflationist tells us about the unity issues? How does it solve the representation problem in the substantive ways that King was aiming for? King's "existentially abstracting away" suggestion just ends up telling us that, say, the subject-value and the predicate-value in the proposition expressed by a subject-predicate

sentence are *somehow or other* unified in the proper way, so that the proposition has the truth-condition it does. The abstract facts that King thus gives us appear to be indistinguishable from, say, Liebesman's ascriptions. Moreover, as Johnston (2006, 684) puts it, these appear to be just objective "predications of fitting predicables of topics", to be regarded "as existing anyway, and not as just the outcome of judgment" so that "when it comes to predicability, all possibilities are realized; predicability guarantees predication".[15] How can this solve the representational conundrum for propositions raised by King? How are the representational powers of propositions explained by minds or languages, on the view that King ends up offering?

4. The Cancellation Predicament

I move now to present a structurally similar objection to the alternative *act-theoretic* accounts of propositions that Scott Soames and Peter Hanks have provided and motivated by the explanatory concerns also guiding King. After briefly presenting their accounts and some difficulties previously raised, I'll conclude by articulating a new one for a proposal that François Recanati (2016) has recently made to patch up act accounts in response to them.

Both Soames and Hanks characterize propositions as abstract entities, more specifically, types (as opposed to tokens) of mental or linguistic acts. They both call the main such cognitive act *predication*, but they understand it in different ways. For Soames, it is a very general one, *entertaining*, lacking the specific illocutionary commitments of, say, asserting or guessing. Like Soames, Hanks (2015) has developed a proposal to deal with the representational problem that aims to skirt unconstrained Platonism by taking propositions to be abstract types whose tokens – from which they are claimed to derive their representational powers – are intentional acts of rational beings. Hanks also calls *predications* the basic such types of assertoric propositions. Unlike Soames, however, he takes them to be assertorically committal, not mere acts of entertaining. Here I will mostly discuss Hanks' view, although Soames' raises parallel issues.

It should be said for starters that it is not very clear exactly what assertoric commitment amounts to on Hanks view. He draws inspiration from the near-universal character in natural languages of the three moods (indicative, imperative, interrogative), and the fact that current semantics ascribes sentences in them three different kinds of meanings: assertions, directives, questions. He identifies assertoric propositions (predications) with the first mood. Conventionally, however, the indicative mood can be used to perform a great variety of acts, with different commitments: claiming, concluding, conceding, telling, swearing, conjecturing, assuming, and so on. Hanks declares here (fn. 15) that he wants to put aside "hypothetical predications", counting them as cancelled (more on this presently). Let us hence assume that it is the commitment to truth that distinguishes (categorical) predications from other act types.

The problem with this is the one that led Frege to endorse what Hanks (2015, 9) calls the *constitutive* version of the force-content distinction, which he distinguishes from the *taxonomic* version. The latter is the idea that there is a meaning-component (a truth-conditional component, the proposition proper) common to questions, directives and assertions. The former is the stronger metaphysical view that there are such forceless sentence-level meanings, propositional contents that "are devoid of any feature that has to be characterized using concepts of force. Concepts of force characterize our actions. Propositional contents are prior to these actions and do not depend on them for their natures or representational features", *ibid.*, 19). Now, Hanks rejects the force-content distinction in these two versions; however, as Collins (2017, §5) points out, the reasons he gives for rejecting the taxonomic distinction are not compelling. Hanks appeals to the point already granted, that current semantics distinguishes three sorts of meanings for indicatives, imperatives and interrogatives. But this is neither here nor there. For current semantics also distinguishes meanings for NPs, meanings for VPs, and forceless meanings for

combinations thereof, which might be common constituents of the full meanings of imperatives, interrogatives and indicatives. In fact, as Pagin (forthcoming) notes, Hanks's formalizations also discern them. Given that Hanks appears to have no qualms with abstract entities *per se*, the appeal to current semantics appears to legitimize force-involving sentential meanings as much as their forceless common "parts".

The debate should thus hinge on the *constitutive* version of the force-content distinction. As we have seen, Hanks frames it in terms of priority; at times it just sounds as if he was speaking of *temporal* priority: "Suppose Obama enters a room, sees Clinton sitting in a chair and judges that Clinton is sitting. There is no neutral act of entertainment that precedes this judgment, whether conscious or unconscious. He just spontaneously makes the judgment and in so doing predicates the property of sitting of Clinton. He does not first contemplate the possibility that she is sitting and then decide to judge it to be the case. Nothing like that has to happen consciously or unconsciously (*ibid.*, 19); "Asking whether Clinton is eloquent is not to predicate eloquence of Clinton and then ask whether this predication is true", (*ibid.*, 24). I take the temporal intimations here to be a rhetorical jab at his opponents, irrelevant for the real concerns. For what matters for all concerned, substantivalists and deflationists about propositional unity, I assume, is *explanatory* priority. Platonism itself is not at stake, either; for, as we have seen, both Hanks and Soames assume without reservations propositional types in their ontologies.

But what is then the disagreement, exactly? I take it that the view that Hanks opposes is one along Johnston's (2006) or Liebesman's (2015) objectivist lines, as stated in the previous section. However, as Collins (2017, §7) points out, such views do not assert the explanatory priority of forceless propositions over their force-possessing counterparts, but merely *reject* the priority of the latter that the act-theorists endorses. For it is entirely in sync with the deflationary attitude towards unity to grant that our understanding of (in themselves forceless) propositions comes together with that of the linguistic or mental acts presenting them.

I suggest that we invoke Fine's (1995) distinction between *generic* and *specific dependence* to properly state the disagreement. We should also keep in mind the point that, for deflationists, the explanatory action lies not with propositions in themselves, but rather with the representational vehicles to which they are ascribed. I thus suggest that the priority that Hanks asserts in the previous quotes, and deflationists reject, is the *specific* dependence of propositions on acts:[16]

(SD)   Each proposition is constituted by (and hence dependent on) some representational act

We should reject (SD), I'll argue; but deflationism is compatible with the view that there is no asymmetric priority of contents over acts, at a *general* level: no representational act without an expressed proposition; but no proposition that is not at least a judgeable content. This can be developed by assuming vehicle-compositionality: each proposition is ascribed compositionally to a propositional vehicle, so that for each proposition there are possible representational acts deploying a vehicle that expresses it.[17] By rejecting (SD), we assert nonetheless an asymmetry at the specific level: no representational act can occur without a specific proposition being expressed; but propositions can be expressed without being the content of any specific act.

It is this asymmetry that appears to be established by the so-called Frege-Geach point, which leads many to accept constitutively forceless contents. It is usually discussed in connection with *modus ponens*. This is a valid form of inference, and explaining it is thus one of the items in the job-description for propositions. In the minor premise, a content is asserted. In the major premise, this content appears to be merely the unasserted antecedent of a conditional. For such arguments to be valid – as opposed to equivocation fallacies – the same entity should occur first forceless and then endowed with force; that same entity is a traditional proposition.

Let us consider a particular case, to give focus to the ensuing discussion.[18] Dummett (1982, 341-2) helpfully distinguished between conditional bets, and bets with conditional contents. One wins a bet with a conditional content (say, that Ronaldo will score, if Modrić also plays) if the

condition does not obtain, but one neither wins nor loses a conditional bet in that case. Similarly for conditional directives. A related distinction is widely discussed nowadays for assertions with normative contents, about what one ought to do under specific conditions. Thus, Broome (2014, 132-3) distinguishes norms *with conditional contents* from norms *conditional in their application*. An obligation with a conditional content comes with a wide scope: it is fulfilled (so that one merits praise) if the condition fails to obtain. An obligation conditional in its application (say, that one ought to drive on the right, if a convention of driving on the right is in force) comes instead with a narrow scope: it is neither fulfilled, nor unfulfilled if the condition fails to obtain – so that the question of whether one is to be praised or reproved does not arise.

Conditional bets and directives, and narrow-scope obligations *detach*: if the condition obtains, an unconditional bet or obligation is in place. The Frege-Geach point is then that the validity of any such detachment requires that the assertion that the condition obtains be the assertion of the very same thing that was the condition for the bet or the obligation. The "objectivist" view of propositions outlined above is ready-made to deal with this. When one makes a conditional bet or asserts a narrow-scope conditional obligation, the condition one is thereby putting forward is entirely forceless; it is just the ascription of a property (playing a particular game, a driving-on-the right convention being in place) to a topic (Modrić, the relevant situation), on the Burge-Johnston-Liebesman understanding of this. The condition lacks any force – even the generic force of *entertainment* that Soames's account assumes.

Hanks (2016) raises a problem for Soames's view, which if on the right track appears to question also the deflationary view.[19] In order to pose his problem, Hanks asks us to consider a 'pure act of predication'. For our purposes, we can consider the one in the previous example of a conditional bet, the ascription to Modrić of playing a particular game. Hanks points out that this must be truth-evaluable, which he puts like this: "in a pure act of predicating F of a, a subject accurately or inaccurately represents a as being F". This is of course correct; it just comes down to the fact that propositions have truth-conditions: our condition for the bet must be a discriminating one, separating the circumstances in which the bet is in place from the rest in which it is not. Yet, on the view he is rejecting, the subject "takes no position at all about whether a is F. This is incoherent. The fact that the act of predication can be accurate or inaccurate means that the subject can be right or wrong about whether a is F. But in order to be right or wrong about whether a is F you must take a stand about whether it is F". It should be obvious that, taken as an objection to the deflationary view, this simply begs the question. On that view, forceless propositions have or encode truth-conditions. To be sure, these are the conditions under which a subject *would be right, if he asserted them, or took a stand on them*. But they have them also when they are conditions on bets or on obligations, which the subject is not taking any stand on. Hanks adds an analogy with *sorting*, which will equally convince only the already persuaded.

Let us move then to Hanks's take on the Frege-Geach problem, which appeals to *cancellation contexts*. The idea is that, when they occur as the conditions in our previous examples, propositions still retain their assertoric force (given that they clearly do not have erotetic or directive force), so that a *modus ponens* argument like the ones envisaged above does not come out an equivocation fallacy. It is just that the assertoric force in such a context is cancelled, so that "the cancelled act of predication does not count as an assertion and does not carry the usual consequences and normative requirements" (Hanks 2015, 32). *Prima facie*, it is difficult to make out how this fits consistently together. How could an act of predication, understood as having assertoric force, be part of the condition that Modrić plays the game, without the act thereby having assertoric normative commitments? Hanks (2016) aims to address a concern that Jespersen (2012), Hom & Schwartz (2013), and Reiland (2013) pose, in the form of a dilemma. First horn: cancellation removes the assertoric force. This is bad for Hanks, because the resulting condition still has truth-conditions, in spite of lacking assertoric force (and, by assumption,

either erotetic or directive force). Second horn: the remaining act of predication is just a part of the original one, without another component of assertoric commitment. This is also bad, because it appears to collapse into Soames's view, or the forceless-proposition view; the remaining 'part' is undistinguishable from Soames's acts of entertaining, or is just a plainly forceless content.

Hanks (2016) contends in response that cancellation is not a further propositional act, but a (blind) context. He aims to clarify what he means by providing a few analogies, the most elaborate of which is the Fregean one of the actor on stage, or (I assume) fiction-making in general. It is understandable that Hanks does not want cancellation to be a further propositional act, because this would have the potential to initiate a vicious regress – one more of those that substantive theories of unity have a penchant for creating. This is why 'context' should not be understood in his proposal the way most contemporary semanticists do, namely, as a set of attitudes presumed to be shared. But this creates serious problems, for it seems to follow that, as Hanks admits, "there is *nothing* the actor can do to make his utterances count as genuine assertions", aside from taking "himself out of the theatrical context" (Hanks 2015, 93-4). However, many philosophers currently writing on fiction endorse a view that ordinary people share, to wit, that fictions contain assertions, and may hence be criticized as false or praised as informative. For many of these are not only straightforward assertions, but also inseparable parts of their fictional contents.[20]

Consider this compelling example from Stock (2017): "Nonhuman animals have gone to court before. Arguably, the first ALF action in the United States was the release of two dolphins in 1977 from the University of Hawaii. The men responsible were charged with grand theft. Their original defense, that dolphins are persons (humans in dolphin suits, one defendant said), was quickly thrown out by the judge", in K. J. Fowler, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. This proposition is an essential part of the content the fiction-maker is putting forward for us to imagine; Fowler is not "taking herself out" of the fictional context in presenting it. However, given the theme of the novel and the moral seriousness with which she pursues it, together with relevant conventions for the genre, it is natural to take it also as a straightforward assertion, capable of transmitting testimonial knowledge; critics would rightfully object to the novel if the proposition were false. As already said, this is correct according to many current philosophical accounts: we are entitled to acquire knowledge by testimony from reading this piece of fiction. Hanks is committing himself to rejecting these views, without properly engaging with them.[21]

Hanks (2016) also relies on an analogy with games (football here, chess earlier, cf. Hanks 2015, 32, 94), but they are not more helpful. In a game, a physical act may 'count as' a move in the game with normative consequences, according to its constitutive norms. There are contexts in which the physical act is just that, a mere physical act which does not count as the relevant move in the game or has its normative implications – for instance, when one is showing a learner how chess pieces move. Hanks assimilates *cancelled predication* to the physical act as taking place in such contexts: "The act of tackling is analogous to the act of predication, and scoring a safety is analogous to performing an assertion". But the analogy doesn't really work. What is analogous in the linguistic case to the physical acts in games is the emission of the relevant physical sounds or inscriptions, made just for the sake of practicing elocution, or accidentally produced by a non-intentional agent. Not only the assertoric force is absent in such cases; the representational component is absent as well. There is no mystery in there being physical events of a kind such that, when they are instantiated in other circumstances, they would come with a representational content, with or without force. What Hanks needs to explain by invoking cancelled assertion is the *prima facie* appearance that there are events or acts that have truth-conditions, without having assertoric force. His examples are not relevantly analogous to this.

Aware of these difficulties, but otherwise convinced that Hanks' view on the representation problem is along the right lines, Recanati (2016) provides an elaboration of the cancellation account that he takes to be compatible with the main tenets of Hanks's views. Recanati appeals

to distinctions from speech act theory that he has developed elsewhere. He considers cases such as one in which Alex is being told by Bert, 'You are an idiot!', and utters in reply: 'I am an idiot. Very nice of you.' Alex's utterance of 'I am an idiot' is obviously not assertorically committal; it is somehow ironic. She is uttering a sentence that semantically conveys an assertion (this understood as a generic kind, along Hanks's lines) that she is an idiot. This would be her *locutionary act*, in Austin's terminology as interpreted by Recanati (2013). The assertoric force in this act is conveyed by the assertoric sign (mood) in its role as what, on Recanati's interpretation, Hare (1970) called *tropic*. The utterance lacks, however, what is indicated by the assertion sign in another function which, on his interpretation, Hare called *neustic*. In this role, it indicates true assertoric commitment – usually of a more specific kind, contextually indicated, than the generic force expressed in its tropic role. However, Recanati argues that the assertion sign in the ironic utterance *does* perform a neustic role; it is just that the relevant assertoric commitment is being merely *simulated*. Alex is echoing a truly committing assertion taking place in a different context – one made by Bert, in the example.

The same happens, according to Recanati, in fiction-making: genuine assertions of a fictional narrator are simulated. This proposal would allow him to circumvent the previous criticism of Hanks's, which he shares. For there is no incompatibility in both simulating a genuine assertion occurring in another context and at the same time really making it in one's own. Recanati (2016) contends that this provides a good account of Hanks's notion of cancellation, otherwise respecting his main tenets. He also gives some indications about how to extend the view to cases that are not so *prima facie* easily amenable to it, such as the conditions we contemplated above, or in general embedded declaratives. Finally, he addresses Hanks's suspicion that Recanati's proposal in fact collapses into Soames's, by surreptitiously embracing the second horn of the dilemma that, as we saw above, Jespersen (2012), Hom & Schwartz (2013), and Reiland (2013) pose. While Soames, like Frege, takes entertaining to be more basic than asserting or judging (which involve a supplementary operation of endorsement), Recanati, like Hanks, takes asserting and judging to be more basic, and cases of 'mere' entertaining to involve a supplementary operation (cancellation for Hanks, simulation for Recanati).

I will not enter the debate between Hanks and Recanati here. As I have argued, Hanks' own account badly fails on the Frege-Geach problem; Recanati's simulation proposal at least appears to provide a worth-exploring escape route. For it to work, we should take it as establishing what, as we have seen, is ultimately at stake here, i.e., (SD). This "being more basic" of asserting and judging that the simulation proposal aims to ground must be of the *specific* kind that has proven to be contentious, not of the *general* sort that, as I pointed out, is not under dispute. And I think we can conclusively show that, taken in this way, Recanati's proposal is also untenable.

This is shown by the fact that there are many propositions in fictions that are part of their contents, and competent readers are thereby intended to imagine, without in any way coming to do so by simulating an assertion thereof. Recanati is fond of Lewis' account of truth-in-fiction, which appears to fits his proposal. Lewis (1978, 266) motivates it thus: "Storytelling is pretence. The storyteller purports to be telling the truth about matters whereof he has knowledge. He purports to be talking about characters who are known to him, and whom he refers to, typically, by means of their ordinary proper names. But if his story is fiction, he is not really doing these things." Given this, the worlds constituting the truth-conditions for the fiction "are the worlds where the fiction is told, but as known fact rather than fiction. The act of storytelling occurs, just as it does here at our world; but there it *is* what here it falsely purports to be: truth-telling about matters whereof the teller has knowledge" (*ibid*). This would underwrite Recanati's proposal; for us to imagine any particular proposition that is part of the story is for us to simulate that it has been put forward "as known fact", i.e., asserted.

Unfortunately, as many have pointed out, this doesn't work. In previous work (García-Carpintero 2007, 203-4) I gave a clear-cut example refuting it, which also shows that Recanati's

account of cancellation fails. I quoted in full (my own translation of) a short story by Julio Cortázar, "A Continuity of Parks". It features a reader "transported" to what he reasonably takes to be a merely fictional story which, unfortunately unbeknownst to him, narrates a succession of events in fact simultaneously unfolding while he reads, eventually leading to (one infers) his being killed "offscreen" in the story's denouement. This is the central content of the fiction, the proposition that any competent interpreter must imagine, or entertain, for her to properly appreciate it. However, as I explain there, we would never have concluded it from the assumption that we have to simulate competent assertions, to find out what the fictional narrator puts forward "as known fact". The assumptions required to get the true content of the story are too weird, obtaining only in remote possible worlds if at all, for anybody to pretend to assert anything on their basis, or for us to imagine that this is what is going on. It is only because this is a fictional context, with its own commitments, that we are led to entertain the relevant content.

As said, this is just an extreme case of something much more common, but it helps confronting Recanati's proposal in its own terms. It wouldn't be irrelevant to ask Recanati to provide evidence that we are simulating the assertion of an embedded proposition, when we understand the more complex sentence embedding it, in the way we may grant that we engage in simulation in cases like the echoic irony one that he provides. The philosophical evidence afforded by our phenomenology is missing there, and Recanati doesn't suggest that he has any psychological evidence regarding what is going on at the subpersonal level. But the fiction example has the merit of directly addressing Recanati's proposal in the very terms in which he advances and grounds it. Just relying on the kind of data he uses – concerning clear-cut cases for which simulation proposals are advanced – we can confirm the Frege-Geach point usually made with examples like our previous conditionals; to wit, that we do represent specific propositions without in any way having to assert them, or simulate such assertions. Thus, for all we can say, (SD) fails, and with it the Hanks-Recanati version of a substantive approach to propositions.

The generic dependence of propositions on representational acts survives this criticism; in fact, at several points Recanati gives the impression that this is what he really wants – perhaps this reinforces Hanks' suspicion that what Recanati is trying to establish is not really his position. Be that as it may, as we have seen, the generic dependence of propositions on representational acts is compatible with a deflationary view of propositions. The explanatory tasks for which substantivalists like Hanks posit propositions with substantive and thereby problematic features are to be carried out elsewhere; they are to be pursued, I have suggested, by appeal to facts about the representational vehicles for the relevant representational acts, which express the propositions. These are better left to be understood in ways as ontologically noncommittal as possible.

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Notes

[1] See King's "What Role do Propositions Play in our Theories?", in King et al. (2014).

[2] I don't mean to suggest that the explanation would then be immediate; cf. below, fn. 14.

[3] Cf. Davidson's (2005, 76-97) nice presentation of the early history of the debate.

[4] Cf. King (2009), Schnieder (2010), Eklund (2016), and Collins (2017).

[5] Like King, Davidson also expresses high ambitions in his discussion of these topics. He considers a proposal like the one by Burge, Johnston and Liebesman just outlined, and dismisses it with the complaint that "the purported asymmetry does not explain the relation between the thing named and the property" (2005, 86). Earlier he had warned us that, without a substantive account of that relation, the "philosophy of language lacks its most important chapter …; the philosophy of mind is missing a crucial first step if it cannot describe the nature of judgment; and it is woeful if metaphysics cannot say how a substance is related to its attributes" (*ibid*., 77). Deflationists would dismiss the worry, on the grounds of Lewis's point. Tellingly, Burge (2007)

and Liebesman (2015) provide compelling reasons to doubt that Davidson's own proposal accomplishes his ambitious goals.

[6] Cf. Speaks' "Propositions are Properties of Everything or Nothing", in King, Soames, & Speaks (2014); Richard (2013), and Pautz (2016).

[7] Stalnaker himself has pointed this out, as Ostertag (2013, 519) reports. The properties that I will henceforth take propositions to be correspond to the *states of affairs* that on Matthews' (2007, 153) presentation of the measure-theoretic account are *representatives* of the attitudes.

[8] Cf. Keller (2013) for the problems the contrasting view raises for substantivists.

[9] Cf. Merricks (2015, 157-8), Speaks's "Representation and Structure in the Theory of Propositions", in King et al. (2014), and Keller's (2013, 670) "lightweight" constituency. Glick (2017, 31-2) questions Stalnaker account, correctly pointing out in my view that it is ultimately a form of "vehicle-first" accounts of singularity, which he rejects. On my view, Glick longs here for a more informative account of the singular/general distinction than can be had in terms of propositions. In contrast, here too approaches at the level of "vehicles" or representational acts do allow for a more informative account (cf. García-Carpintero & Palmira, ms).

[10] Cf. Richard (2013, 707-8, 716) and Field (2016).

[11] Cf. Pickel (2015) for a clear elaboration of these concerns, the most obvious ones of a modal nature: kinds do not seem to get their essential properties from the contingent activities of rational beings. See also Speaks's "Representational Entities and Representational Facts" in King et al. (2014), Caplan *et al.* (2013), Caplan (2016).

[12] As Pickel (2015) shows, this might also create a more straightforwardly Bradley-style regress, on account of the related worries discussed in the papers in the previous footnote. As these writers also suggest, these difficulties in the King-Soames-Hanks program are evidence for a deflationary view.

[13] This seems to be what King suggests for perceptual experiences, cf. King *et al.* (2014, 60, 191-5); Collins (2017, §7) makes a similar proposal.

[14] Actually, the explanation is not so straightforward as this might suggest (cf. Glüer 2016). I think that her concerns can be addressed by a proper elaboration of the idea that experiences and corresponding perceptual judgments differ in *force*, but need not to do so in content (Pryor 2000, 547, fn. 37).

[15] As Collins (2017, §7) points out, this "combinatorial" view of propositions is nonetheless compatible with a view on which they are dependent on the nature of cognition; see below.

[16] Hanks (2015, 3-4) appears to be saying this much (my emphasis): "Propositions get their truth conditions from *particular* acts of judgment and assertion which are themselves the original or primary bearers of truth and falsity. The *source* of truth conditions is to be found in the acts of representation we perform when we make judgments and assertions, not in the propositional contents we use to classify and individuate these actions." The contention that acts of representation ground truth-conditions should be understood relative to the point that "[p]ropositions are types of actions, and propositional attitude relations are *tokening* relations", *ibid.*, 7. Cf. also Hanks (2016): "The representational features of these acts are not borrowed from pre-existing propositions. They are *generated* in the performance of the acts themselves".

[17] In order to make this compatible with the assumption I have been making that perceptual experiences and perceptual judgments might express the same propositions, we should need some rule-governed, compositional-like account of how depictive content is determined; but current research allow us to be optimistic on this front, cf. Giardino & Greenberg (2014).

[18] The same problem of course arises in many other cases: disjunction, negation (Hom & Schwartz 2013, 19), the prejacent conditions (sometimes merely contextually implicit, Dowell 2012) and the open sentences required to account for generality (Collins 2017, §6).

[19] Perhaps the problem that Hanks' raises is intended only to affect Soames's account, as Indrek Reiland pointed out to me; I do not take a stand on this.

[20] Cf. García-Carpintero 2016, and references there.

[21] Cp.: "there is nothing the actor can do to make his lines in the play count as full-fledged assertions. No act of subscription or identification or endorsement can convert his stage utterances into real assertions. The only way for his utterances to count as genuine assertions is for the theatrical conventions to be lifted and the play to end. This drives home the fact that these conventions create a context that overrides the assertive character of the actor's utterances", Hanks (2015, 96, fn.). Of course, we could have used a theatrical example instead of a novel. Recanati (2016, §4) is equally unhappy with this aspect of Hanks's views, although as we will see he otherwise mostly agrees with them.