

Gaskin's Ideal Unity*

Manuel GARCÍA-CARPINTERO[†]

1. Preamble

This is a (moderately long) book-length discussion of a problem that exercised the fathers of Analytic Philosophy, following a distinguished tradition in fact traceable to Plato's later dialogues, the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist*. It is a problem that is not often discussed these days (but see King 2007, whose views are not explicitly discussed in this book – curiously, for a work otherwise as scholarly as any I have come across, countenancing proposals about the issues it discusses not just from the whole Western philosophical tradition, but even from Indian sources). The problem is: what is it that holds the constituents of a proposition together? As this way of putting it shows, the problem presupposes that there are propositions and that they have constituents. The book takes up these presuppositions in the first two chapters, justifying the commitment to propositions, explaining their role and their nature, and arguing for their structured character; then, in the two following chapters, it critically discusses well-known proposals for solving the unity problem, especially the one by Frege, according to which what holds the propositional constituents together is the fact that at least one of them has a functional or “unsaturated” character, and variants thereof in Russell, Strawson and others; and finally, in the last two chapters, it moves on to offer a boldly original solution, elaborates on it, and defends it from potential criticisms. All in all, it is, as the author advertises, “a fuller treatment of its topic than has ever been undertaken” – and a very interesting and rewarding read at that.

In this review, I will raise issues, some of clarification, some more critical, on three rather preparatory matters: the interaction of the Context Principle, given the so-called Linguistic Idealism through which Gaskin understands it, and the Principle of Compositionality; the relation between the disquotational notion of propositional truth that Gaskin relies on, and the correctness of speech acts, assertion in particular; and the interaction between Gaskin's “theoretical” conception of reference and his notion of *strict name*. I am not sure how the issues I will raise bear on the main topic of the book, or what effect my criticisms might have on Gaskin's proposal – whether or not a proposal along the lines of his could be

[†] Departament de Lògica, Història i Filosofia de la Ciència, Universitat de Barcelona, Montalegre, 6–8, 4^a planta, 08001 Barcelona, Spain; E-mail: m.garciacarpintero@ub.edu

sustained, even if my objections are on the right track. This is because I am not sure I have understood the proposal. Examining Wittgenstein's confrontation with Russell on the topic of this book, and Russell's subsequent 1913 abandonment of the manuscript of *Theory of Knowledge*, one can be shocked to see how his own rhetoric could apparently hide from a first-class philosopher what Gaskin correctly describes as "antinomies" (pp. 318–319): contentions that, denuded of the concealing rhetoric, appear to be straightforward contradictions. I have a similar feeling about Gaskin's solution to the problem he sets out to study; concerning this, the central part of the book, I will limit myself to evincing my misunderstanding by indicating why the solution seems to me to be deeply paradoxical. At the end I will indicate how I see the problem of propositional unity.

2. *The unity of the proposition: Gaskin's account*

This is how Gaskin summarizes the problem for accounts like Frege's: "no ingredient of the sentence can effect unity in the sense of being *sufficient* for unity: for [. . .] no ingredient can enter into a sentence in such a way that the resulting sentence cannot be duplicated by a mere list comprising exactly the same components as that sentence, including the magic 'unifying' ingredient" (p. 285; cf. also p. 333). This criticism reveals a Bradley regress, of the same kind as the one affecting attempts to explain the relation between particular and universal by positing a relating universal, instantiation (pp. 314–317). In addition, Gaskin contends that "no special ingredient is *necessary* for unity either. For we can construct bona-fide sentences lacking a verb or concept-expression" (p. 285). What, then, is the solution? As I said, it is bold and original: "Bradley's regress emerges not as an embarrassment, something to be circumvented by careful legislation, but as the metaphysical ground of the unity of proposition [. . .] what stops a proposition from being a *mere* aggregate of entities, and the corresponding sentence from being a *mere* list, is that the proposition unfolds into an *infinite* aggregate, and the sentence into an *infinite* list" (p. 345).

This is certainly thought-provoking. To develop the idea, Gaskin appeals to Dummett's notion of a complex predicate (in *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, and elsewhere; see the excellent discussion by Sullivan forthcoming). Unlike the fully-fledged propositional constituents posited in a correct compositional account of the language, complex predicates (essentially all those obtained by λ -abstraction, as represented through formalization in the λ -calculus), "are *formed* from a complete sentence by the omission of one or more of its constituent expressions" (p. 297). Now, they "are to be so read that they incorporate the unity of the sentence and of its corresponding proposition" (Ib.); such a predicate "does not merely contain within itself names and placeholders for names, but expresses the copulative structure of the unified sentence" (Ib.); in this way, they are a kind

of “abstracted copulas, which we may call copulas in the logical sense” (Ib.). On the basis, I assume, of the deflationary views about reference and referents that I will discuss critically later, Gaskin contends that these “logical copulas” refer and have referents, although, quite understandably, “the mere presence of the [. . .] logical copula in a sentence, and the presence of its referent in the corresponding proposition, is too close to being a merely definitional feature of sentence and correlative proposition to provide any kind of explanation of their respective unities” (p. 342). Quite so, one says to oneself: “what unifies a sentence and its corresponding proposition is not an ingredient of the sentence or proposition, in the sense of a component that is antecedently available to be configured with other, similarly available ingredients, but a structural property” (p. 299).

However, if one goes on reading, one finds this: “If we think of that structural property in functional terms, as a unifying function, then I suggest that nothing prevents our conceiving the function in question as a part of the proposition which it goes to unify and which is its value for the objectual and conceptual components of the proposition taken as argument, so long as we are careful to distinguish *parts* from *ingredients* [. . .] In the case of the sentence, the unifying structural feature is what I have called the logical copula, whose structuring activity is somehow embodied in a regress that arises when we try to specify a reference for it” (Ib.); “the special nature of the logical copula’s referent – the infinitistic nature of its referent – can perhaps lay claim to having some explanatory value” (p. 342). One cannot but note the damage-containing rhetoric: “nothing prevents our conceiving . . .”, “can perhaps lay claim to . . .”. But the point remains that these curious referents of the logical copulas both are (if called ‘parts’), and are not (if called ‘ingredients’), propositional constituents; and worse than that, they both play an explanatory role in accounting for propositional unity (they are what accounts for it) and do not play such an explanatory role (after all, they were not needed in the first place).

Thus, while, as we saw before, “no special ingredient is *necessary* for unity”, it turns out that “the regress can also be regarded as, at each stage, comprising necessary and sufficient conditions for the presence of that crucial feature at any preceding [. . .] stage” (p. 352). Perhaps it “can be so regarded”, because we are prone to so “regard” the most astonishing things; but, seriously, how can it be regarded as comprising a necessary condition for unity, given that we have already been led to accept that no special ingredient is necessary for it? Also: “the initial stage of the regress comprises a complete, unified proposition, constituted in the first place by its capacity to be true or false” (Ib.); however, it turns out that it enjoys this capacity “in virtue of its possession of a logical copulative feature corresponding to the logical copula of its governing sentence” (Ib.) (a feature that, remember, was a merely almost definitional abstraction and, therefore, not an “ingredient” but a mere “part”); and so it “follows that the regressive unfolding

[. . .] is constitutive of the base proposition's unity" (p. 353). Finally, it turns out that what we have here is an "explanatory *in virtue of* relation" which "operates in both directions" in the regress, upwards and downwards (p. 356) – while, on my understanding at least, the 'in virtue of' relation is analytically asymmetric. As I said before, I must be missing something crucial about the proposal, because it seems to me to be a barely concealed set of inconsistent claims.

3. Context and compositionality

At different points in his writings, Frege defends two important methodological principles, the Context Principle and the Principle of Compositionality. These principles are sometimes seen in tension, so much so that some writers ("incompatibilists", as I will call them) have argued that Frege could not have held them at the same time; see, for instance, Janssen (2001). Informally, the Principle of Compositionality says that the meaning of a complex expression is determined by its structure and the meanings of its constituents. Under some assumptions (cf. Pagin and Westerståhl forthcoming), it is equivalent to a Principle of Substitutivity that Frege assumes already in "On Sense and Reference", both for senses and for references, even though he does not articulate there some of the usual motivations for it (accounting for the productivity and systematicity of natural language understanding, the ability to express and understand new thoughts, learnability of languages with a potential infinity of expressions) until much later, for instance at the beginning of "Compound Thoughts". On the other hand, Frege invokes the Context Principle in the *Grundlagen*, but he manifests commitment to it in later writings: "Never ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a sentence." "It is enough if the sentence as whole has meaning; thereby also its parts obtain their meanings".

On the face of it, there seems to be a tension here. On the one hand, the meaning of, say, 'ambulo' in Latin compositionally depends on the meaning of the verbal root 'ambul-' and the meaning of the lexeme '-o'. On the basis of this dependence, we aim to explain the systematicity of linguistic meaning – the fact that a competent speaker who understands 'ambulo' also understands other sentences, like, say, 'ambulabat'. On the other hand, the Context Principle suggests that a verbal root like 'ambul-', and lexemes like '-o' or '-abat', only have meaning in the context of a sentence; their linguistic meaning has to be explicated in terms of their contribution to the meaning of the sentences they might contribute to form. The thought here appears to be that an expression has the meaning it does in virtue of the way it is used within some linguistic community, on the assumptions that (i) the use of an expression is exhausted by its employment in speech acts, and (ii) it is sentences, not words, that can be employed to make speech acts. Now, there appears to be a vicious circularity lurking here. If the meaning of 'ambul-' depends

on the meaning of the sentences in which it might appear, thus on the meaning of the sentences it might contribute to form together with lexemes including '-abat', how can we also say that the meaning of 'ambulabat' depends on the meanings of 'ambul-' and that of '-abat'? How can we really have an explanation of the systematic ability to understand new sentences, like 'ambulabat', on the part of anybody competently understanding 'ambulo'? The conflict arises from reading some asymmetrical explanatory relation in each of the motivations for the two principles, so that we end up assuming:

(Cont) Lexical units have their meanings *in virtue of* the meaning of sentences in which they occur as constituents

(Com) Complex expressions have their meanings *in virtue of* their structure and the meanings of their constituents

Gaskin, like many philosophers, starting with Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, is a compatibilist. He defends the Context Principle, in a rather strong version giving rise to his "Linguistic Idealism" that I will discuss in the next section: "Sentences are conceptually prior to words, in the sense that words are a theoretical abstraction from sentences; the account of what a word is and what it is for makes essential reference to its role in sentences" (p. 189); "in the beginning was the *sentence* – true or false – and words, together with their senses and referents, are posited with a view to gaining an essentially theoretical understanding of how sentences mean, how they are interrelated, and how on the basis of our linguistic training we are able to understand new sentences" (p. 242). The latter quotation makes it clear that Gaskin takes the two principles to be compatible, for the theoretical dependence of words on sentences which the Context Principle states is said to account also for systematicity, which is what Compositionality is also supposed to account for (cf. also the longer discussion in Gaskin 2006, 203–215).

Which one of Cont and Com, then, does Gaskin's own view jettison? It transpires from an interesting critical discussion of Cora Diamond's more radical "contextualist" interpretation of Wittgenstein that it is the latter, which is consistent with his Linguistic Idealism: "there is no need to react to this tension by jettisoning either the context principle or the principle of compositionality. Instead we should relativize the different priorities to distinct projects or points of view. Dummett provides us with a handy characterization of the needed relativization, noting that 'in the order of *explanation* the sense of a sentence is primary, but in the order of *recognition* the sense of a word is primary' " (p. 257). Now, I do not think it will do to take only the dependence relation stated in the Context Principle to be *ontological*, while the one stated in the Compositionality Principle is merely *epistemological*, as this suggests. That new sentences have meanings fully determined (in context, cf. Pagin and Westerståhl's discussion of this aspect) by the meanings (in context) of its constituent lexical units, and not merely meanings "recognized to be determined by" the latter, is required for the Principle of

Compositionality to do its explanatory work. Gaskin comes close to acknowledging this earlier in the book, when he says that “we must respect the principle of compositionality [. . .] if the understanding of novel sentences is to be explanatorily perspicuous. The linkages carried by words and their referents cannot be *individual* in nature – they cannot be linkages to individual words and their referents as these words occur in a *given* sentence or proposition – but must be *general*, in the sense that words and their referents carry slots for words or objects of a certain general kind” (p. 194).

In this text Gaskin comes close to suggesting the kind of compatibilist solution that I favour, relying on a distinction between generic and specific dependence that Kit Fine (1995) has articulated in recent work. The meaning of sentences depends *specifically* on the meanings of each lexical unit and meaningful syntactic structure constituting it; it is determined by the semantic properties of each particular one of them, and, as a result, understanding a sentence requires understanding of each and every significant component. The meaning of units like ‘ambul-’ depends *generically* on the meaning of the sentences it might contribute to form, thus on the meaning of lexemes like ‘-o’ and ‘-abat’. The meaning of ‘ambul-’, i.e., cannot be specified without combining it with the meaning of *some or other* lexeme like ‘-o’; but there is no particular lexeme whose meaning is to be mentioned in giving the meaning of ‘ambul-’. As a result, two speakers (or one at two different times) might give the same meaning to the root, even though they consider for it its combination with different lexemes; and we can properly explain how each of them understands new sentences. Both dependence relations are ontological, not merely epistemological, a matter of how things are recognized or theoretically articulated. On this view, a principle that Pagin and Westerståhl call *Reverse Compositionality* applies together with the Principle of Compositionality:

(Com) The meaning of a complex expression is determined by its structure and the meanings of its constituents.

(Rev) The meaning of an expression is determined by the meaning of some set of complex expressions in which it occurs as a constituent.

The two principles are compatible with each other, and with the motivation adduced in favour of the Context and Compositionality principles. But I do not think that they are compatible with Linguistic Idealism.

4. Linguistic idealism, reference and truth

Gaskin understands the Context Principle as involving a view from which he derives strong claims, which I find unmotivated, especially if one sees the principle, as I have advocated in the previous section, as imposing one more constraint on the theoretical consequences of the Principle of Compositionality: “sense and reference as essentially *derived* notions. Intelligible symbolic language is the

given, and the senses and referents of items of symbolic language are theoretically derived posits" (p. 42); "we have no *pre-theoretical* insight into what a proper name (or any linguistic expression) refers to" (p. 241); "we have, in general, no pre-linguistic access to reality and, ultimately, reality is itself constituted by our linguistic access to it" (p. 260). Of course, one could agree with these views under the assumption that a theoretical access to something is a correct access to something that is supposed to be the way correct theorizing characterizes it before any such theorizing occurs. But I guess this is not the intended interpretation, but rather that the purported view is along the lines of Davidson's; as Sainsbury puts it, "reference relates to truth theory in the way that posited microphysical objects relate to the observed macrophysical situations: reference is empirically a derived relation, not a basic one, and is whatever relation makes the assignment of truth conditions to whole sentences meet the demands of proper interpretation" (2005, 59). I agree with Sainsbury that this view is unmotivated. In the first place, there are good empirical reasons to think that there is "pre-linguistic" reference, such as the ones Sainsbury describes and empirically substantiates on chapter 7 of the aforementioned book; linguistic reference would then build on this non-linguistic reference, which would explain how linguistic reference is possible. In the second place, a robust reference relation, perhaps along the lines of the one based on the eligibility of natural properties articulated by David Lewis (1983, 370–377) is required to put a reasonable limit on the amount of indeterminacy envisaged in, for instance, Putnam's (1983) infamous model-theoretic argument for anti-realism (cf. also García-Carpintero 1996).

When it comes to proper names, Gaskin defends an "object-dependent" view for what he calls "strict names", following Evans and McDowell. According to him, whether or not an expression is a strict name cannot be established on the basis of how it looks. Empty but intelligible proper names are disguised descriptions (whose reference is not an object but a "complex" made of the referent of the determiner and the referent of the nominal phrase) (p. 71, p. 73); on the other hand, at some point Gaskin wonders whether 'the concept horse' is a strict proper name or a description (p. 144), and so seems to assume that descriptions could be strict names – although in some other passages (p. 342) he just assumes, without further ado, that something which looks like a definite description *is* a definite description and not a strict name. (I do not know what views Gaskin has about indexicals; at one point (p. 123) he seems to be assuming that three demonstratives co-referential in a given context have different referents, against "direct-reference" views otherwise consistent with his Evans-McDowell line on strict names.) Once again, I find these views unmotivated. The usual, Kripke-based considerations in favour of distinguishing the semantics of names and descriptions (modal intuitions of rigidity, the so-called "semantic" argument) do not differentiate empty names like 'Vulcan' from non-empty names; neither do intuitions about the expression of

“singular propositions” by sentences including names, vis-à-vis the “general propositions” expressed by corresponding sentences with descriptions.

Gaskin defends the priority of propositional truth over sentential truth and the truth of acts of judgment or assertion (p. 16), and he explains propositional truth in terms of disquotation (p. 113). The notion of proposition is highly theoretical; depending on your choice, propositional truth might well be definable disquotationally. Nonetheless, this by itself leaves unexplained something that requires explanation, a point that Dummett (1959/1978) made a long time ago. A disquotational definition effects a division in the class of propositions, separating the true ones from others. Now, there are other propositional acts, in addition to assertions and judgments; promises and requests have contents, which are the contents of possible assertions and judgments. The disquotational definition also effects a division in the class of promises and requests, exactly as it does in the class of assertions. However, while we call the ones in the second division ‘true’, we do not do so with the ones in the first; we might say that a promise in that group is “satisfied” or something like that. This suggests at least that, when it comes to characterizing the correctness conditions of propositional acts, something more is required than establishing whether or not the intended proposition is (disquotationally) true; and the point applies to promises and requests, to assertions and judgments, even if in the latter case we do use the same word, ‘truth’. As Dummett puts it, the disquotational characterization fails to explain the point (the purpose, or normative force) of the different propositional acts. It is my view, which relates to the previous criticisms of Gaskin’s Linguistic Idealism, that a proper characterization of truth as expressing the/a normative point of assertions should end up invoking the “correspondence” intuitions that, as expressed by Crispin Wright (1999/2003), Gaskin dismisses (pp. 115–116); but this is not the place to develop this claim.

5. *The account of the unity of the proposition*

King (2007) includes criticisms of Frege’s and Russell’s accounts of the unity of the proposition not dissimilar to Gaskin’s, and an alternative account, which I regard as incorrect for reasons that it will be useful to examine, as a background and partial justification for the kind of account I will end up suggesting.

The Tractarian *Picture Theory*, that the expressions signifying structured facts/state of affairs are themselves facts/states of affairs, inspires King’s account. The main idea is that the unity of the proposition, the glue putting together object and property in a simple atomic proposition such as that expressed by ‘Rebecca swims’ is ultimately the syntactic relation syntactically linking (at the proper syntactic level, call it *Logical Form*) ‘Rebecca’ and ‘swims’: “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).

Now, pay close attention to this notion that the relevant syntactic relation between the lexical items R *encodes* the instantiation function. In his initial presentation, King leaves out this aspect of the account, but he then feels compelled to amend his presentation by including it, as a result of reflection on "the semantic significance of syntax" (p. 34). What he makes the reader realize is that the very same concatenation relation between 'Rebecca' and 'swims' under R *might signify different things in different languages*. It could signify that the semantic value of 'Rebecca' *does not* instantiate the semantic value of 'swims'; or it could even signify *the sheer concatenation* of the semantic value of 'Rebecca', the instantiation function, and the semantic value of 'swims' (i.e. it could be a list without propositional unity), a point that Gaskin notes in a passage one can take as an implicit criticism of King's view (Gaskin, *op. cit.*, p. 299). It is to amend the account to deal with this difficulty that King introduces the "encoding" idea.

Now, as he notes, this relation "is so different from the sorts of semantic relations that obtains between words and things like Rebecca and the property of swimming" (King, *op. cit.*, p. 37); for that would be precisely the relation between the concatenation syntactic relation and the instantiation function in the language in which the sentence is no sentence but a mere list, and its meaning lacks propositional unity. So, what does this difference consist in? What distinctively characterises this semantic relation between syntax and signified proposition that King calls 'encoding'? Here is the proposal: "In effect, we can think of this bit of syntax as giving the instruction to map an object o and a property P to true (at a world) iff o instantiates P (at that world). This instruction has two crucial features. First, it involves a specific function f : the function that maps an object and a property to true (at a world) iff the object *instantiates* the property (at the world). Call this function f *the instantiation function*. Second, the instruction tells us that f is to be applied to the semantic values of the expressions at the left and right terminal nodes (and a world) to determine the truth value of the sentence (at a world)" (p. 34).

Now the worry should be glaringly clear: this instruction that the syntactic relation encodes is, precisely, the instruction to take the constituents as being in whatever relation it is that characterizes propositional unity, whatever relation it is that makes constituents into propositions which *say* something, *represent* a state of affairs, *have* a truth condition. As Gaskin puts it, "what distinguishes a declarative sentence from a mere list of words is that a sentence has the capacity to say something *true* or *false*, whereas a list does not" (p. 352). King's account helps itself without further ado to our understanding of this, which is precisely what we

wanted to understand in the first place. Where Gaskin appeals to a regress he claims not to be vicious to account for propositional unity (in a way I have found very difficult to make consistent sense of), King appeals to a very small circle he claims to be virtuous (cf. the discussion on p. 50).¹

What the failure of the efforts by these very capable philosophers suggests to me is that it is folly to look for an account of propositional unity; this is just a primitive fact to be regarded with Wordsworthian natural piety. Or, rather, as Lewis puts it in a related context, in which he is 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” (1983, 352).*

REFERENCES

- DUMMETT, M. 1959/1978, ‘Truth’, in: *Truth and Other Enigmas*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 1–24.
- FINE, K. 1995, ‘Ontological Dependence’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **95**, pp. 269–290.
- GARCÍA-CARPINTERO, M. 1996, ‘The Model-theoretic Argument: Another Turn of the Screw’, *Erkenntnis* **44**, pp. 305–316.
- GARCÍA-CARPINTERO, M. 2006, ‘Frascolla on Tractarian Logical Pictures of Facts’, *dialectica* **59**, pp. 87–97.
- GASKIN, R. 2006, *Experience and the World’s Own Language*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- JANSSEN, T. 2001, ‘Frege, Contextuality and Compositionality’, *Journal of Logic, Language, and Information* **10**, pp. 115–136.
- KING, J. 2007, *The Nature and Structure of Content*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LEWIS, D. 1983, ‘New Work for a Theory of Universals’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **61**, pp. 343–377.
- PAGIN, P. and WESTERSTÅHL, D. forthcoming, Compositionality I: Definitions and Variants; Compositionality II: Arguments and Problems, *Philosophy Compass*.
- PUTNAM, H. 1983, ‘Models and Reality’, *Philosophical Papers vol. 3*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SAINSBURY, M. 2005, *Reference without Referents*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- SULLIVAN, P. forthcoming, ‘Michael Dummett’s Frege’, in: M. Potter and T. Ricketts, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Frege*.
- WRIGHT, C. 1999/2003, ‘Truth: A Traditional Debate Reviewed’, in: S. Blackburn and K. Simmons, eds, *Truth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 203–38; also in his *Saving the Differences*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 241–287.

¹ My criticism of King concerns only his aim to provide an illuminating account of propositional unity; I in fact think that the book provides a good account of what propositions are, capturing interesting aspects of the Picture Theory that a proper account dealing with what I take to be the main aim of the *Tractatus* (that of providing a philosophically satisfactory account of logical validity) should preserve; cf. García-Carpintero (2006).

* Financial support for my work was provided by the DGI, Spanish Government, research project HUM2006-08236, and through the award ‘ICREA Academia’ for excellence in research, 2008, funded by the Generalitat de Catalunya. Thanks to Peter Sullivan for helpful discussion of some topics in this review, and to Michael Maudsley for the grammatical revision.