

# Content Pluralism<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

How fine-grained are the contents of our beliefs and other cognitive attitudes? Are the contents of our beliefs individuated solely in terms of the objects, properties, and relations that figure in their truth conditions, or rather in terms of our concepts, or modes of presentation of those objects, properties, and relations? So-called Millians famously maintain the former whereas their Fregean rivals hold the latter. Much of the 20th century literature on the nature of propositional content can be seen as a debate between the Millians and Fregeans on this question of grain.<sup>2</sup> But despite the vast amount of ink spilled on the metaphysics of propositions, including the important recent work of act-type theorists such as Hanks and Soames, the problem of grain remains with us.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the audience at the Workshop on Act-Type propositions at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Donostia-San Sebastian, as well as Gary Ostertag for discussion of this material. A very special thanks is due to Peter Hanks. Much of our thinking on these matters is directly responsive to his written work as well as discussions with him on related issues. From the earliest presentations we can remember seeing Peter give on his view, he emphasized the underlying propositions-as-devices-of categorization thesis fueling his work. Moreover, even in those early presentations, he also openly embraced a pluralism of content that seems to naturally follow (see the discussion of “The Uniqueness Thesis’ in Hanks (manuscript). In what follows, it should be clear how indebted we are to Peter.

<sup>2</sup> Although conceiving of propositions in terms of sets of possible worlds remains important in formal semantics, the philosophical dispute has primarily been between two parties, Millians and Fregeans. See Schiffer (2008) for further discussion. In what follows, we will mostly set aside the possible worlds view of propositions.

<sup>3</sup> See Hanks (2015), as well as Soames (2015), for how we might try to accommodate at least some of our Fregean intuitions on the act-type theory.

In what follows, however, we will argue that there is an important insight forthcoming from the newer work on the metaphysics of propositions that helps us see the traditional debate between Millians and Fregeans in a new light. Roughly put, the insight, especially emphasized in Hanks (2015), is that propositions are fundamentally devices of categorisation. In particular, they serve to characterise our thoughts and utterances in terms of their representational features, features that can, and must, be understood independently of the propositions we use to track them. As we will see, this categorisation insight allows one to sidestep the forced choice presented by Millians and Fregeans. Simply put, the states that realize our propositional attitudes have *many* contents that themselves differ in representational grain. Our proposed resolution to (or dissolution of) the question of grain won't be completely satisfying to either the Millian or the Fregean. We hope, however, that the pluralist conception of propositional content that we will sketch will be appealing to those theorists, such as us, who feel the pull of aspects of both of the Millian and the Fregean accounts.<sup>4</sup>

The game plan is as follows. In the first half of the paper, we revisit some of the motivations and problems for the traditional Fregean and Millian theories of propositional content. As we will see, though neither of these accounts is correct, they both offer important, and conflicting, insights regarding the problem of grain. In effect, our judgements regarding representational sameness and difference are equivocal; Millian intuitions regarding grain motivate one metric of representational sameness, Fregean intuitions another. In the second half, we then turn to the more recent work on propositions focusing on the act-type view due to Hanks (2015) and Soames (2010), as well as the minimalist view we favor,<sup>5</sup> focusing on the categorization insight that underwrites both. We then show that the categorization conception of propositions, naturally leads to content pluralism. We conclude with a brief discussion of the shape of this pluralism would take on the act-type view, as well as on Minimalism.

## **Section One - The Millian and the Fregean**

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<sup>4</sup> There are a number of important precedents for our favored response to the problem of grain including the pluralist accounts of content favored by Chalmers (2006) and Perry (2001), as well as Moore (1999). Like Moore, we think that pluralism flows naturally from the correct metaphysical story of propositions.

<sup>5</sup> See Grzankowski and Buchanan (2019) and Buchanan and Grzankowski (forthcoming).

Both the Millian and Fregean hold the orthodox view that (i) propositional attitude verbs such as ‘believes’ express binary relations between agents and the semantic value of a ‘that’-clauses: a belief report of the form ‘S believes that p’ being true if, and only if, the agent in question stands in the belief relation to the semantic value of ‘that p’, and (ii) that the semantic value of a ‘that’-clause is a proposition. What distinguishes these theorists are their differing accounts of the nature of the propositions that ‘that’-clauses designate.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Millian (a) the propositions we believe and assert are *Russellian* propositions – structured complexes composed of objects, properties, and relations and (b) the propositional contribution of a referring expression is merely its referent; the propositional contribution of a predicate is the property it expresses.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the Fregean holds that propositions are structured entities built out of an agent’s concepts or modes of presentation (“MOPs”) that figure in their truth-conditions. The dispute between the Millian and Fregean is a familiar one, so we will be brief in our treatment of the views. Our primary goal in this section is to remind the reader of the various ways in which each view seems to get something right.

Start with the Millian. Suppose a competent speaker literally and sincerely utters (1) while demonstrating the country singer, Garth Brooks:

(1) That guy is American.

Millian theorists hold that the propositional contribution of a referring expression such as the complex demonstrative ‘that guy’<sup>8</sup> simply *is* nothing over and above its referent. The semantic contribution of a predicate is simply the property or relation it expresses. Hence, one might represent the proposition expressed by the speaker’s utterance of (1) as as the following:

$\langle \alpha, \varphi \rangle$

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<sup>6</sup> We have our general doubts about the orthodox account. See for example Bach (1996) and Buchanan (2012, 2016). We will leave this aside for present purposes.

<sup>7</sup> Notice that one could endorse the Russellian conception propositions without being a Millian. One could, for example, be a descriptivist and hold that the contribution of a referring expression (say, ‘Aristotle’) is a uniqueness property (e.g, the property of being the one and only greatest philosopher of antiquity) .

<sup>8</sup> We are assuming that the complex demonstrative ‘that guy’ in (1) is a genuine referring expression (for some dissent see King 2001).

where  $\alpha$  is Garth,  $\varphi$  is the property of being American. The ordered pair being true at a world  $w$  if, and only if,  $\alpha$  instantiates  $\varphi$  at  $w$ , and is false otherwise. But notice that this will be the same proposition expressed by any utterance of a sentence that differs from (1) only in the substitution of some co-referring expression with ‘that guy’. So, for example, the Millian will hold that (1) expresses the same proposition as (2):

(2) Garth Brooks is American.

Not only is this prediction well motivated by the familiar arguments from Kripke (1980), Marcus (1961), and others for taking referring expressions to be rigid designators, it is also intuitive. Isn’t it clear that these two utterances at least in some important sense represent the world as being exactly the same way? After all, a thinker who judges (1) and (2) to be true is predicating the same property of the same object.<sup>9</sup>

If we further assume that the singular Russellian proposition expressed by (1)/(2) is the semantic-value of the ‘that’-clause in (3), and that ‘believes’ expresses a two-place relation between believers and things believed, then we might represent the belief report in (3) as (3a):

(3) Gwen believes that Garth Brooks is American.

(3a) Believes <Gwen, < $\alpha$ ,  $\varphi$ >>

For the Millian, *what* Gwen is claimed to believe in (3) is itself the singular proposition < $\alpha$ ,  $\varphi$ >. And in some sense, this seems to be exactly the right prediction. After all, when we consider Gwen’s belief reported in (3), isn’t it plausible that it represents things as being just as the speaker uttering (1) said them to be? Moreover, isn’t there some clear sense in which we would be reporting exactly the same belief of Gwen’s if we’d instead said, ‘She believes that guy [demonstrating Garth] is American’?. Millian contents might seem to be of just the right fineness of grain.

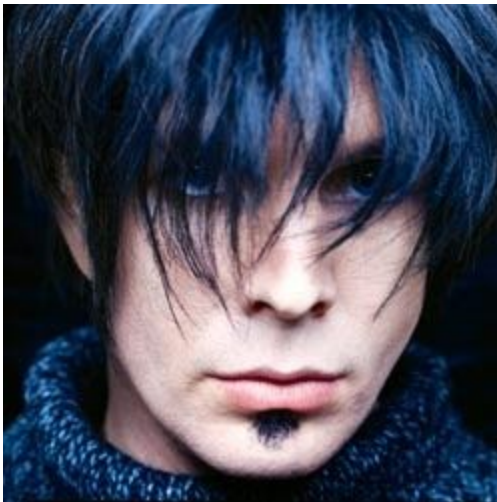
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<sup>9</sup> The last step in this argument may be seen as implicitly based on a principle about the identity of propositions. An elementary version of this principle, involving simple propositions that predicate a property or relation of one or more objects, is given by (pi).

(pi) If  $p$  and  $q$  are simple propositions in which precisely the same properties are predicated of precisely the same things, then  $p = q$ .

The idea behind (pi) is that all there is to propositions is the way they represent things as being. Since the propositions semantically expressed by (1) and (2) both represent the same man as having the same property, and don’t differ in the way in which they represent anything else as being, the proposition semantically expressed by (1) and the proposition semantically expressed by (2) are one and the same.

By contrast, the Fregean account of propositional content is best understood as a direct response to the perceived problems with the Millian view. To illustrate their worries, recall one of the more interesting episodes in the modern history of country music involving Garth Brooks. The then most popular country singer, Garth Brooks, released an album of very bad pop music under the alias 'Chris Gaines' and toured the country in disguise to promote the record.



This was a time of considerable confusion. While we were confused why the famous country star would dress in disguise and play such atrocious pop music, Gwen's confusion was different. She did not, as we might want to put it, realize that Chris Gaines is Garth Brooks. Though she would have happily accepted the sentence 'Chris Gaines is Canadian' as true, she ardently denied that 'Garth Brooks is Canadian' is true. The belief report given in (4) was intuitively true of her, though (5) seemingly false despite the fact that Chris Gaines is identical to Garth Brooks:

(4) Gwen believes that Chris Gaines is Canadian.

(5) Gwen believes that Garth Brooks is Canadian.

In fairness to Gwen, her beliefs were perfectly reasonable – Garth did somehow look like a pop star of the era in his disguise as Chris Gaines, and it is common knowledge (at least in the Southern States of the US) that Garth is American (in the United States sense of ‘American’).

The appearance of opacity is worrisome for the proponent of Millians for at least two types of reasons. The first worry is a semantic one, call it the Semantic Problem. Their theory does not appear compatible with the possibility that (4) and (5) could literally diverge in truth-value, and this prediction is at odds with many speakers’ intuitions regarding such cases. According to the Millian, ‘Chris Gaines is Canadian’ and ‘Garth Brooks is Canadian’ express the same singular proposition:  $\langle \alpha, \varphi \rangle$ , and hence the two ‘that’- clauses in (4) and (5) refer to the same proposition. Hence, given the orthodox view, (4) and (5) express the same proposition, which we might represent:

(4/5a) Believes( $\langle$ Gwen,  $\langle \alpha, \varphi \rangle \rangle$ )

According to the Millian, (4) and (5) must have the same truth conditions, but this is, for many, highly counter-intuitive.

The second type of worry for the Millian deriving from our case of Garth Brooks concerns the *rationality* of agents to whom we are ascribing propositional attitudes.<sup>10</sup> To illustrate, let’s more fully describe the case concerning Gwen. Not only would she have taken the sentence ‘Garth Brooks is Canadian’ to be false, she would insist that both ‘Garth Brooks is not Canadian’. Hence, we have good evidence that not only is (5) (seemingly) false, but that (6) is true, as well:

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<sup>10</sup> In our view, the biggest worry for the Millian account concerns the rationality of belief reporters who sincerely and competently assert propositions that are, according to the Millian, contradictory. Note that the same evidence that would incline us to assert (6) as true (her accepting ‘Garth Brooks is not Canadian’) would also be likely to incline us to assert (i), which on first pass, would be represented by the Millian as (ia):

(i) Gwen does not believe that Garth is Canadian.  
(ia)  $\sim$ Believes( $\langle$ Gwen,  $\langle \alpha, \varphi \rangle \rangle$ )

(ia) looks to be the contradiction of the Millian representation of (6) – *i.e.* (6a). But this is as puzzling, if not more so, than the situation regarding (5) and (6). However implausible it is to claim that Gwen is irrational given (5) and (6), it is even less plausible to think that a well-intentioned, well-informed speaker inclined asserting (6) and (i) is irrational. How can the Millian explain how a speaker sincerely uttering (6) and (i) is not irrational, given that on her account the semantic contents of those reports? Let’s dub this worry The Speaker Rationality Problem. See Braun and Saul (2002) and Braun and Sider (2006) for attempts to address this worry for the Millian.

(6) Gwen believes that Garth Brooks is not Canadian.

According to the most obvious way of implementing the Millian account, an utterance of (6) would express a proposition that we might represent as (6a):

(6a) Believes(<Gwen, << $\alpha$ ,  $\varphi$ >, NEG>>)

If Millianism is correct, then (5) and (6) are both true, and Gwen believes both a proposition and its negation. The truth of (5) and (6), however, in no way seems to impugn Gwen's rationality. Though Gwen is no doubt confused, she is not irrational. How, according to the proponent of Millianism can this be? That is, how can an agent rationally believe contradictory propositions? Call this worry the Rationality Problem.

Millians are sensitive to these worries and have offered well known replies. For example, one approach to the Semantic Problem appeals to pragmatics. According to such a reply, although literal utterance of, for example, (5) and (6) in fact do not diverge in truth value, speakers who utter them might be understood as pragmatically conveying propositions that do so differ (perhaps, for e.g., that Gwen would accept 'Garth is Canadian' (False) and she would accept that 'Chris Gaines is Canadian' (True)).<sup>11</sup>

In reply to the Rationality Problem, Millians have appealed to the metaphysics of mental states that underlie the truth of the utterances we make concerning them. Although *what one believes* is a Millian proposition faithfully reported in a belief attribution, there is also a question concerning *how* that information is encoded by, say, a belief. There are various ways one might see this idea through, but to offer just one illustration, one might appeal to distinct representational vehicles that are no part of content but which are important when determining the rationality of an agent. To reiterate, the basic thought is that we must distinguish *what the agent believes* from further facts regarding *how she believes it*, or internally represents it; further facts that are claimed to not themselves reflected in the semantics of reports such as (5) and (6) above, but rather in the story of the underlying states that realize our propositional attitudes. It is then claimed that Gwen can rationally believe both a Millian proposition and its negation, so long as she does so under suitably different internal guises.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Salmon (1986) and Soames (2002) for two sketches of how such a pragmatic story might go.

<sup>12</sup> See Salmon (1986) and Braun (1998) for more details.

Fregeans are famously unimpressed with the Millian’s attempts to explain away our anti-substitutivity intuitions pragmatically. And while the Fregean will applaud the appeal to internal representations, guises, or the like, in the metaphysics of our propositional attitudes, they will insist that the Millian has misplaced this insight. For the Fregean, examples such (5) and (6) above genuinely differ in truth-value as a direct result of differences in *what* Gwen believes (not about how she believes it). After all, they will say, isn’t part of the data to be explained is that (5) and (6) seem to report Gwen as believing different *things*; *i.e.* different propositions.

Let us say that any account according to which the contents of belief are mode-of-presentation-involving is a *Fregean account of belief*. Fregean accounts come in many varieties, but for ease of exposition, it is best to begin with a version of the view inspired by Recanati (1993).<sup>13</sup> According to Recanati, propositions are structured entities whose components are modes of presentation pertaining to how an agent “grasps” the relevant objects and properties her belief concerns. The contents of belief, on this view, are conglomerates of objects, properties, relations, *and* modes of presentation thereof. The content of Gwen’s belief reported in (4) might be represented as the *quasi-singular proposition* in (4a):

(4) Gwen believes that Chris Gaines is Canadian.

(4b) << Chris/Garth, <sub>M</sub>Chris>, <the property of being Canadian, <sub>M</sub>Canadian>>

where <sub>M</sub>Chris and <sub>M</sub>Canadian are ways Gwen has of thinking of Chris/Garth and the property of being Canadian, respectively. Crucially, returning to the Speaker Rationality Problem, Gwen might rationally believe this MOP-involving proposition, while disbelieving, or withholding belief, from the quasi-singular proposition we might represent as (4c):

(4c) << Chris/Garth, <sub>M</sub>Garth >, <the property of being Canadian, <sub>M</sub>Canadian>>

In the case as described, we might say that Gwen fails to recognize that <sub>M</sub>Garth and <sub>M</sub>Chris are modes of presentation of one and the same guy. More generally, Fregeans seek to offer an account that allows for more fineness of grain than the Millian, and in some sense, this seems to be just what is needed to account for our intuitions.

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<sup>13</sup> Recanati’s favored Fregean account (including his ‘quasi-singular propositions’) was originally due to Schiffer (1978).



Both the Millian and the Fregean have their problems. It is, for example, difficult to see how Fregean propositions could be suitable candidates for the contents of speech acts.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, it is safe to say that there is not, at present, any fully satisfying pragmatic story that Millians have been able to offer that plausibly explains away our intuitions of opacity. But, for present purposes, we'd like to emphasize a different aspect of this familiar debate: both the Millian and the Fregean seem to be getting something right. Indeed, it is very hard for us to see how we might do without *some* notion of content according to which (1) and (2) represent the world as being the same way. But when we turn to the individuation of mental states, something finer grained looks to be all but unavoidable (even the Millian who follows Salmon and appeals to guises in her theory of belief states feels the pull). For the Fregean, examples such (5) and (6) above genuinely differ in truth value as a direct result of differences in *what* Gwen believes (not about how she believes it). After all, as noted above, Gwen seemingly believes different things. Backing up, consider Gwen's (token) belief states reported in (5) and (6). Do those token states represent the same or not? In a sense they do, and in a sense they do not. The former reflects our Russellian intuitions, the latter our Fregean intuitions. We would be hard pressed if forced to choose between these intuitions.

But why, exactly, *should* we have to choose? It would be preferable if our metaphysics of propositions didn't leave us in this bind. In fact, we think that a theory of propositions that purports to decisively settle this question of grain would be problematic in much the way that a theory of baldness would be were it to issue precise verdicts in *all* cases. Here, as elsewhere, our theory should be just as flexible as the data demands.

## **Section Two – Propositions as Devices of Categorization**

Millian and Fregean views have recently come under attack from a different direction. According to both of these accounts, propositions are abstract, structured entities that *intrinsically represent*. Moreover, these structured entities are claimed to be fundamental in the account of how our mental states and utterances that have them as contents, represent things as being. On these traditional accounts, for example, it is claimed that Gwen's belief that Chris Gaines is Canadian represents as it does *in virtue of its propositional content*, be it Fregean or Millian. We, along with Hanks (2015), King (2007), Soames (2010, 2015), and other recent theorists reject this picture wholesale.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Buchanan (2010) and (2016).

<sup>15</sup> For further discussion and debate. King, J., Soames S., and Speaks, J. (2014).

One of the central worries motivating Hanks, and others, is that it is puzzling how propositions could represent all on their own. This mystery is only compounded if we take propositions to literally be n-tuples built out of ordinary objects and properties, or modes of presentation thereof. How could it be that an n-tuple represents anything, intrinsically, or otherwise? The n-tuple <Austin, London, pugs> doesn't represent anything, so why think it is any different with, say, <Garth Brooks, the property of being Canadian>? As Hanks and others have argued, Millian and Fregean theorists have offered no plausible account of how the constituents of such an n-tuple can be "glued" together so as to issue in a genuinely representational entity.

Much of the new work on propositions can be seen as an attempt to explain how propositions could be representational even if not intrinsically so. For our own part, we don't think that propositions do, in fact, represent, so our principle worry about the traditional Millian and Fregean accounts is different. As also emphasized by Hanks and Soames, these traditional accounts of content claim that propositions play a fundamental role in the story of mental and linguistic representation. According to the Millian and Fregean theorists, our thoughts and utterances *inherit* their representational features from their propositional contents. For example, Gwen's belief is claimed to represent as it does *in virtue of* its content – the proposition that Chris Gaines is Canadian. But how exactly could this be? How (even in principle) could the (putatively) representational features of a proposition "trickle" its way down to our token cognitive states and utterances?<sup>16</sup> More plausibly, our thoughts and utterances represent as they do, not in virtue of their propositional contents, but rather in terms of naturalistically specifiable properties they instantiate. In slogan form: *propositions serve to help us keep track of the representational facts, facts which themselves must be understood without essential appeal to propositions*. Propositions are, as Loar (1981) once put it, "external indices" that simply help us categorize and track representational facts.

We think this insight – let's call it *the categorization insight* – should be accepted by all theorists and, moreover, it is the key to resolving the traditional debate between the Millian and Fregean regarding grain. As we will argue, it is a short step from viewing propositions as devices of categorization to a variety of pluralism about content. The best way to see how this idea might work is to see it in the context of a specific categorizing view. Although we think the move we wish to make may be open to other categorizing theorists, we will focus on the act-type theory and our own preferred view, Minimalism.

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<sup>16</sup> See Grzankowski and Buchanan (2019) for further discussion.

According to the act-type theorist, propositions are types of cognitive acts. Specifically, they are types whose tokens are specific, representational, predicative actions. For example, when one judges that Garth is Canadian, one predicates the property of being Canadian of Garth. This token act falls under a type: the act-type of predicating being Canadian of Garth. The act-type theory of propositions identifies propositions with such act types. So, the proposition that *a* is F *just is* the act-type of predicating F of *a*. The fundamental relationship that holds between thinkers and the contents of their thoughts is simply one of tokening of a type. For example, Soames holds that *what it is* to entertain that Garth is Canadian is to perform a token act of predicating being Canadian of Garth. Other propositional attitudes can then be analyzed in terms of entertaining: to judge that Garth is Canadian is to predicate being Canadian of him *and to endorse that prediction*; believing that proposition is the disposition to so judge.<sup>17</sup> The basic idea might be spelled out in various ways, but the principle is that there are certain events/actions that are themselves representational (token predicative acts) and propositions must be understood as devices for categorizing them. The relationship between these representational events/acts and the propositions that we use to track them is of token to type.

Despite the many attractive features of the view, it comes with some serious costs. In previous work we have discussed some of these costs and we won't rehearse all the details now, but, in short, we think that the act-type theorists make unnecessary commitments that lead to hard questions and serious problems.<sup>18</sup> We here briefly mention just two.

First, the act-type view leads to the conclusion that propositions are literally things that one *does*. It is very tempting to claim this claim constitutes a category mistake – how could the proposition that Garth is Canadian *happen yesterday* or *be done by* someone? Act-type theorists are, of course, well aware of this problem and are apt to claim that they are offering a *revisionary* metaphysics. Even so, we are not, ourselves ready to bite this bullet since, as will emerge, we think that there is another alternative (Minimalism) that has all of the virtues of the act-type theory but without this initially troubling consequence.

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<sup>17</sup> See Soames (2010) for further development.

<sup>18</sup> See Buchanan and Grzankowski (forthcoming) and Grzanowski and Buchanan (2019).

Second, we think that commitment to token *predicative acts* as basic is misplaced. When we think of the various representations that we would like our theory of content to help us track, predicative events and activities are just a special case. For example, we are sympathetic to the view that our perceptual states are propositional attitudes, but we think it is a stretch to conceive of these states as involving any acts of predication performed *by an agent*.<sup>19</sup> While *looking* and *listening* may indeed be things one *does*, *seeing* and *hearing* are not.<sup>20</sup> You do not *perform* the act of predicating, say, redness of the cup when you see the red cup. Even if one holds that a computational system is engaged in building up representations when you perceive the cup, it is implausible that this is, in any sense, an *action* of yours, any more than, say, your liver processing the alcohol you consumed at dinner can be considered something *you* did as an agent. Likewise, it is difficult to see how exactly to analyze other of our propositional attitudes such as our wants and desires in terms congenial to the act-type theory. When Gwen desires that Mom visit, she is not yet, in any sense, predicating visiting of Mom. If she had already performed the prediction, what is left to desire?<sup>21</sup> The act-type theorist might claim that in such propositional attitudes a prediction is made and then canceled (Hanks 2015) or that there is some variety of non-committal prediction (Soames 2015), but neither of these options is especially appealing to us. Again, we would prefer an account that captures the insights of the act-type account, but which doesn't force us to address such worries.

There is indeed a much more minimal (and general) alternative way of capturing the categorization insight that underwrites the act-type account. Recall that categorizing views of propositions aim to coordinate attitudes in terms of what they represent with entities. More specifically, any two mental or linguistic states that represent the same as each other must be coordinated with the same proposition; a proposition is simply an entity whose job it is to help us keep track of such representational similarities and differences. In effect, we claim that this is the only thing you need to know in order to fully understand the nature of propositions.

By our lights, all theorists can, and should, accept the following bi-conditional:

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<sup>19</sup> See Hanks (2015, p 211) who aims to finesse this point by distinguishing between those states that are constitutively or fundamentally propositional versus those that have content in a non-constitutive or non-fundamental sense. We'd prefer a theory that doesn't force one's hand and leaves space for the view that perception is, fundamentally, a propositional attitude. See also Soames (2015, ch. 5) who looks to be committed to the view that perception does involve acts of predication by an agent.

<sup>20</sup> See Crowther (2009).

<sup>21</sup> See Schiller (forthcoming).

PC: The propositional content of M1 = the propositional content of M2 iff M1 and M2 represent exactly the same objects, properties, and relations in exactly the same way (where M1 and M2 range over possible mental state tokens).

(We call it for ‘PC’ for “propositions on the cheap”.) In Grzankowski and Buchanan (2019), it has been argued that no one should find fault in the *truth* of this bi-conditional. The act-type theorists’ view entails PC and seems to capture a minimal constraint on propositional content. But on our view, PC provides an (implicit) real definition of propositions in just the way that (a) and (b) plausibly do for numbers and directions, respectively:

(D) The direction of line A = the direction of line B iff A and B are parallel.

(N) The number of Fs = the number of Gs iff there is a one-to-one correspondence between the Fs and the Gs.

Likewise, we think that PC tells us everything there is to know about *what it is for a thing to be* a proposition. If there are entities answering to the left hand side of PC (and we think there are) “then there is no question of what their natures are, since their natures flow from their definitions and their definitions are settled” (Rosen and Yablo, manuscript, p.11). Moreover, the right-hand side of PC should be understood as more fundamental than the left. Very much in the spirit of other categorizers (and, in fact, naturalisers more generally), it is *because* token mental states represent the same as each other that they have the same content, not vice versa. There are many ways one might go on to tell this story (in terms of tracking, teleology, multiple relations, or so on) but whatever it is, it is doubtful that such a story must make essential appeal to relations to propositional abstracta. In slogan form, the facts about linguistic and mental representation come first.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> On our preferred view, mental representation is itself explanatorily prior to linguistic representation, so in what follows we will focus on the former.

It is, however, not enough to simply say what contents are. We must also say what it takes to *have* content. When one bears a propositional-attitude relation to a proposition, one must be in a state of a certain sort that represents in a certain way. Furthermore, anyone else who represents that way will also be related to the same proposition. By PC, there must be an abstract entity in common to such co-representations – the belief that grass is green represents the same way as all the other states from which the proposition that grass is green is abstracted. The relation of having a content can then be understood as follows: X is in a token mental state which represents the same way as all other states from which Y is an abstract. When X stands in such a relation to Y, X is in a propositional attitude relation to Y; X has Y as its content.

Minimalism demands very little regarding the nature of propositions. PC only requires that the (possible) mental state tokens on the right-hand side represent. More generally, Minimalism does not require that propositions must, in any sense, inherit the properties of the (possible) mental state tokens from which they are abstracted. Even if, for example, the mental states we use propositions to track are structured and representational (for example, suppose they are sentences in Mentalese), there is no demand that propositions must themselves have (or inherit) these features.<sup>23</sup> For the Minimalist, we should not worry about whether propositions have any features that cannot be directly read off from the abstraction principle via which these entities are introduced. Hence, questions such as whether propositions could turn out to *really* be types of actions/events, or whether they must themselves be *really* representational, simply do not arise for the Minimalist. Propositions have no such hidden natures to discover.

At the core of the recent work on act-type accounts is the categorization conception of propositional content. We think that Minimalism fully accommodates this important insight, but does so without incurring the further costs and commitments of the act-type view. Act-type theorists – and all would-be naturalizers – accept PC, and, like us, understand the right-hand side to be more fundamental in the order of explanation. Why should we commit to anything more?

Though we have been emphasizing some of the differences between our favored story from that of the act-type theorist, it should be clear that there are deep commonalities between the two. In the next section, we will highlight one such important commonality: both views naturally lend to content pluralism.

### **Section Three: Grain and Plurality**

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<sup>23</sup> See Grzankowski and Buchanan (2019) as well as Rescorla's (2020) for more on this point.

Let's take inventory. In section 1 we argued that there is a sense in which Gwen believes that Garth is Canadian and a sense in which she does not. Rather than force a choice and finesse the unpalatable consequences, it is our view that one's theory should respect that data as it is found. In section 2 we turned to the categorization approach to propositions and argued that insight underlying this approach has given way to important and interesting new accounts of propositions. Our own favored view, Minimalism, is one such view and it is built around a principle, PC, that we think all theorists should take as a starting point. Understood in this way, we might see the act-type theorists as one who accepts PC as true, but denies that it provides the whole story regarding propositional content. They then go on to claim that, for example, we must further understand the entities referred to on the left-hand side of PC as types of predicative acts, and the (possible) mental states on the right-hand side, tokens of those acts. For now, however, we just want to emphasize that act-type theorists accept PC even if they think more must be said regarding the nature of propositions.

But what are the implications of accepting PC in tandem with our observations regarding the Millian and the Fregean in Section 1? As best we can see, the implication is a kind of pluralism.

In the present section we will explain this consequence and clarify the general shape that we think this pluralism will take. We will argue that there is a lot to like in the kind of pluralism we will offer, but, of special interest, the picture allows us to respect the intuitions we have about Gwen and about Frege cases more generally. We will then close by offering some reasons for thinking that the act-type theory, with its additional commitments that go beyond Minimalism, is committed to a much more expansive, and potentially problematic, kind of pluralism.

Recall that the right-hand side of PC concerns sameness of representation. On the Minimalist view, the central question about grain comes down to how we ought to think about sameness and difference of mental representation, as the answer to that question will determine the deliverances of PC. As we argued above, we think that in a case like Gwen's, the answer to this question fails to be univocal. This observation – this data point – should now be slotted into PC. There is a sense in which Gwen represents things as being the way folks in the know about Gains and Brooks represent things. The sense is the one brought out by classical Millians. There is also a sense in which Gwen represents differently than those in the know but the same as other confused fans. This sense is the one brought out by the classical Fregeans.<sup>24</sup> PC hence has two disambiguations and yields two entities as a result. One entity has a “Millian grain” and the other a “Fregean grain”.

If the notion of ‘representation’ appealed to in PC is indeed equivocal, we are given a plurality of contents, since anytime there is a truth on the right-hand side of PC, there is a corresponding entity named on the left-hand side. There are propositions a plenty for both the would-be Fregean and the Millian. But we must treat this result with some caution. More specifically, we should avoid any temptation to think that the upshot of this view is that Gwen has a single belief with multiple contents. This is *not* how one should utilize the plurality provided by PC. In fact, we think that this ought to be avoided. Consider the property of being the belief state (that is, consider the type of belief) that Brooks is Canadian. Such a property is a composite property, part of which is the relation of believing and part of which is the content of the belief. In what sense might such a property have *multiple* contents? A belief is the very belief that it is at least in part because of how it represents. If one holds that beliefs and other intentional states have multiple contents, it becomes difficult to make sense of this truism. Rather, PC provides the story concerning propositions (now a plurality of them) but it brings with it a theory of the relation that thinkers bear to propositions. The relation, to repeat from above, is as follows: X is in a token mental state which represents the same way as all other states from which Y is an abstract. When X stands in such a relation to Y, X is in a propositional attitude relation to Y. In effect, along with a plurality of contents comes a plurality of mental states.

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<sup>24</sup> And in the extreme, there may be a sense – following Field (2016), call it an “egocentric content” – in which representing-the-same-as that requires nothing short of sameness of truth-condition as well as sameness of conceptual role. Understood as such, these egocentric contents might (de facto) never be shared between two distinct agents (or even the same agent across times).



To elaborate, let's return to Gwen. Given that there is a sense in which Gwen represents the same way as the fans in the know, there is a proposition that is in common amongst those fans and Gwen. A belief of Gwen's *has* that content, *i.e.* that content is such that Gwen is in a token mental state that represents the same as the other mental states from which that content is an abstract. On our view, Gwen's token belief has only that single content. But given that there is a sense in which it represents the same as the many confused fans, there is another content and, corresponding to it, another token belief of Gwen's. Gwen has, what we might call, a Fregean belief as well as a Russellian belief. If so, it really is true, then, that there is a sense in which Gwen does believe what those in the know about Garth Brooks believe and a sense in which she does believe what those who are confused believe. We tie ourselves into knots over Frege cases by assuming there is but one belief.

But let us be very clear now about the relationship between Gwen's beliefs and Gwen's brain, for the proliferation of *mental* states might initially seem incredible. Our view is *not* that there are more brain states than one might have imagined. Let us suppose for a moment that physicalism is correct and that there is some interesting brain state of Gwen's that we have isolated. That brain state will have various intrinsic properties such as firing and so and so many Hertz, weighting such and such many micrograms, and so on. That brain state constitutes, but is not identical to, Gwen's Fregean belief. That very same brain state constitutes, but is not identical to, Gwen's Russellian belief. The difference lies in the various relational properties that the brain state instantiates. The Russellian belief is constituted not only by the brain matter but also by the relations to worldly objects and properties such as Garth himself. The Fregean belief is constituted not only by the brain matter but also by, say, the relations to other mental states of Gwen's (for example, Gwen will deny Gains is a music legend).<sup>25</sup> In short, we hold the independently motivated view of constitution physicalism.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The causal properties of beliefs and other mental states are physical properties. Since Gwen's Fregean belief and her Millian belief are constituted by the same physical brain stuff, they both plausibly inherit the casual properties of the common neuro-physiological state.

<sup>26</sup> We discuss this view and argue for it in more detail in Buchanan and Grzankowski (ms). Importantly, the constitution view is well motivated in the face of Kripke's (1980) famous argument concerning pain and the nearby variant of that argument applied to representational states found in Burge (2009). Mental states cannot be identical to brain states but they can be constituted by them. On our favored view, your token mental states are "qua objects" in Fine's sense (1982, 2003, 2008). For example, your belief that grass is green might be identified with a state of your brain qua-thing-with-such-such-history-and-functional-role.

The variety of pluralism at which we have arrived raises numerous difficult questions that don't seem altogether easy to resolve. For example, we've been proceeding as though there are only two possible senses of 'representing-the-same' as it occurs in PC. Is that right? Might there not be others? For example, are there a multitude of more or less, fine-grained sameness relations? Or is there a sameness-relation that requires sameness of phenomenology? We can't settle these questions here. Rather, our goal has been to show that a commitment to PC – which we think everyone should share – in tandem with our intuitions regarding Millian/Fregean cases (taken at face-value) pushes us towards pluralism. Moreover, we think that this pluralism seems to be just what is required to make sense of the lack of resolution in the debate between Millians and Fregeans. Reconsider Gwen. When we reflect on whether she does or does not believe that Garth is Canadian, we can genuinely respect the intuitive verdict: in a sense she does, and in a sense she doesn't. If you accept PC and that our judgements regarding co-representationality are indeed equivocal, you should, we hope, also, feel the push to pluralism.<sup>27</sup>

It would take considerable work to show how exactly this view regarding the metaphysics of propositions might be squared with a story regarding propositional attitude *ascriptions*. There is, however, a natural fit between our view of propositional content and the accounts of attitude ascription by those theorists such as Richard (1998) and Goodman and Lederman (2020) who hold that 'believes' is itself a context-sensitive expression picking out different relations in different contexts. The very rough idea would be that there are – independent of the context of attribution – multiple belief-relations, but that oftentimes one, rather than the other of those relations might be made to be especially salient in context of the report. In many contexts, however, we get pulled in both the Fregean and the Millian directions, however, since the context fails to determinately single out a unique representing-the-same relation. We hope that these brief remarks are taken in the highly speculative sense in which they are intended. Suffice it to say for now, there is a lot of hard work that needs to be done on this front.

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<sup>27</sup> As we pointed out earlier, one can see the Act-type theorist as someone who endorses PC, but then goes on to make further commitments – in particular, to propositions being understood as types of predicative acts. Notice that since a token act will *always* fall under indefinitely many different types, this further commitment might itself immediately be taken to entail pluralism about content. For example, Gwen's particular cognitive act, of say, predicating snoring of Oscar *thought of as a pug* will fall under infinitely many distinct types (including, for example, the act-type of predicating snoring of Oscar on a sunny day, while wearing a raincoat since that was all true of Oscar on the day). We will leave it up to the reader to decide whether this proliferate pluralism flowing directly from the type/token distinction is a cost (Båve 2019) or a benefit (see Hanks (manuscript)) of the act-type view.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting on the vast literature on Millian versus Fregean accounts of content can be dispiriting. Much ink was spilled, but relatively little was ever achieved by way of consensus. We think the lack of consensus itself cries out for explanation. In the foregoing, we have argued that a diagnosis as to why consensus could not be found – a diagnosis that flows from some extremely minimal commitments regarding the metaphysics of propositions and the attitudinal relations we bear to them. Perhaps, like the Act-Type theorist, you think there must be more to propositions than Minimalists (such as us) have to offer. But, so long as you accept PC – and, more generally, the categorization picture of propositions that it underwrites – you should feel the pull of pluralism, a pluralism that offers a way of reconceiving the traditional debates about the grain of content.

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