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ARE THERE PROPOSITIONS?

1. SOME RATHER WIDESPREAD ASSUMPTIONS

The word ‘proposition’ occurs quite often in philosophical discourse. Sometimes it is used as if the reader should already know what it means, while at other times its introduction is accompanied by some preliminary considerations. Usually, in the latter case the writer explains that the word refers to things of a certain kind, and tries to convince us that it is right to “admit” or “postulate” things of that kind. By far the most popular strategy is to appeal to our ordinary way of speaking. According to a well known line of argument, ‘proposition’ stands for what we intuitively take to be the *object* of a mental act such as thinking, believing, and so on. We ordinarily talk of things thought, believed, and so on, and we seem to presuppose that such things are other than the act of thinking them, believing them, and so on. For example, if we say that both Tom and Mary think that the sea is blue, we seem to presuppose that their respective acts of thinking are different while the thing thought, *that the sea is blue*, is the same. Similarly, if we say that Tom can think that the sea is blue any number of times, we allow that the mental processes involved can be numerous while the thing thought, *that the sea is blue*, remains the same. Or if we say that Tom believes that the sea is blue but does not know it, we seem to presuppose that one and the same thing, *that the sea is blue*, can be thought by Tom in different “ways”.

Another well known line of argument hinges on the distinction between the *sentence* and its *meaning*: one thing is the sentence, i.e. a string of words formed according to the syntactic rules of a language, another thing is the meaning attached to it by the speakers of that language. We ordinarily talk about things such as meanings. For example, we say that the English sentence

(1) the sea is blue

has “a meaning”. Its meaning is *that the sea is blue*. Sometimes we talk of different sentences as having “the same meaning”. For example, we say



Erkenntnis 58: 325–351, 2003.

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that (1) and the Italian sentence ‘il mare è blu’ have the same meaning. They both mean *that the sea is blue*. At other times we talk of the same sentence as having more than one meaning. For example, we say that the sentence ‘visiting relatives can be boring’ has “two meanings”: one is *that it can be boring to visit relatives*, the other is *that relatives who are visiting can be boring*. In accordance with this way of talking, the things called ‘propositions’ are taken to be the meanings of our sentences.

A third line of argument rests on the distinction between the *statement* or *assertion* one makes and the sentence one utters in making it. It is sometimes said that the things called ‘propositions’ are nothing but statements or assertions, and that statements or assertions are other than sentences. Usually, the distinction between sentences and statements or assertions is in turn motivated by considerations such as the following. A certain speaker may assert that so-and-so by uttering a certain sentence. But asserting that so-and-so is not the same thing as uttering that very sentence. On the one hand, in order to assert that so-and-so it is not sufficient to utter that sentence, for one may utter that sentence and assert nothing at all, or assert something else. On the other, in order to assert that so-and-so it is not necessary to utter just that sentence, for other sentences would do as well. The stronger conclusion is usually taken to follow that what we state or assert is not a sentence at all.

The three lines of argument considered so far have in common that they seem to speak in favor of things which we ordinarily identify by means of clauses of the form ‘that so-and-so’, in short, *that-clauses*. That-clauses play the syntactic role characteristic of noun phrases. For example, they can occupy the subject position of a sentence, as in ‘that the sea is blue is true’. Accordingly, it is quite natural to treat that-clauses as semantically analogous to noun phrases, i.e., it is quite natural to treat them as having a reference. This is to say that the considerations seen above lead us to regard such inclination as grounded: if we are entitled to talk of things such as objects of thought, sentence meanings, statements or assertions, a reference for that-clauses seems ensured. Sometimes it is also argued in the opposite direction. That is, the consideration that that-clauses appear to have a reference is advanced in support of the contention that we should “admit” or “postulate” things such as objects of thought, sentence meanings or statements, namely, the things called ‘propositions’. Typically, in this case we find syntactical arguments to the effect that that-clauses are referring expressions or “singular terms”. For example, the inference from ‘Tom believes that the sea is blue’ to ‘there is something that Tom believes’ seems to presuppose that the expression ‘that the sea is blue’ occurs in the first sentence as a singular term. Since the inference is clearly valid, it is

argued, there must be something to which that expression refers, namely, the proposition *that the sea is blue*.

The *prima facie* plausibility of the arguments just considered has led many philosophers to assume that the meaning of 'proposition' is intuitively clear or that it can be easily made clear by means of intuitive considerations. This is why the advocate of the things called 'propositions' is often portrayed as the common-sense philosopher who takes linguistic intuitions seriously, whereas their enemy is portrayed as the scrupulous and scientific-minded philosopher who is suspicious of our ordinary way of speaking.

I take this picture to be misguided. Independently of the reasons one may have not to take linguistic intuitions seriously, it seems to me that there is a point about the purported arguments *in support of* the things called 'propositions' which deserves more attention than it has received so far. The fact is that certain properties are typically assigned to the things in question, so the crucial question to be addressed is whether some support for the claim that there are things *with those properties* can be found in our ordinary way of speaking or anywhere else. If we list the properties in question we get a general sketch of what kind of things, let us call them *Ps*, most philosophers have in mind when they use the word 'proposition'.

I. *Language-independence*. *Ps* can be expressed by sentences of this or that language. But it is not essential to *Ps* that they are actually expressed by certain sentences, nor that they are actually expressed by *some* sentence. The sentence (1) expresses a certain *P*. But the *P* in question does not belong to English or to any other language, and doesn't need to be expressed by (1) or by any other sentence. It existed before English or any other language existed, and would exist even if English or any other language didn't exist. Thus, there can be unexpressed *Ps*, i.e., *Ps* to which no sentence corresponds. An entity *x* depends on another entity *y* just in case it is necessary to the existence of *x* that *y* exists, i.e., it cannot be the case that *x* exists and *y* doesn't exist. Accordingly, *Ps* are language-independent entities, in that it *can* be the case that they exist even if language doesn't exist.

II. *Mind-independence*. *Ps* are the objects of our acts of thinking. However, being the objects of our acts of thinking is not essential to them. The *P* expressed by (1) can be thought. But it is a mere contingent fact about it that it is actually thought. It existed before being thought, and would exist even if it weren't thought. Some *Ps* have never been objects of *any* act of thinking. Then, the existence of *Ps* does not depend on the existence of our minds or on the existence of thought.

III. *Structure*. Ps are made out of constituents of some kind, in such a way that their structure matches to some extent the syntactic structure of the sentences which express them. Thus, the P expressed by (1) must contain at least one constituent corresponding to the expression ‘the sea’ and one constituent corresponding to the expression ‘blue’. The way these constituents are combined must correspond to the way the expressions ‘the sea’ and ‘blue’ are combined in the syntax of the sentence.¹

IV. *Truth*. Ps are the kind of things which are true or false, and the sense in which they are true or false is different from that in which *sentences* can be said to be true or false. Sentences can be said to be true or false given the meaning they have and the way they are used on certain occasions by speakers of the language they belong to. On the contrary, Ps are true or false *independently* of linguistic facts concerning the sentences that express them. In the first place, the way in which Ps have *truth conditions* is different from that in which sentences have truth conditions. (1) has the truth condition it has in virtue of the fact that English speakers use the words occurring in it as they do. Had English speakers used the word ‘blue’ in the way they actually use the word ‘yellow’, the truth condition of (1) would have been different. Sentences have their truth conditions relatively to this or that language, i.e. they are true-in-English, true-in-Italian, and so on. Accordingly, their truth conditions are contingent on the practices of the speakers of the language they belong to. On the contrary, Ps have truth conditions independently of any language, therefore they have them *necessarily* or *essentially*. In the second place, the way in which Ps have a *truth value* is different from that in which sentences have a truth value. A sentence has a truth value relatively to the way it is used on a certain occasion by a speaker of the language it belongs to, therefore its truth value can change from one occasion to another. On the contrary, a P has a truth value without relativization to time or space, therefore it has it *absolutely*. For example, the sentence ‘it is raining’ is true or false relatively to the place and time at which it is uttered. But the truth value of the P we assert by uttering it on a given occasion does not itself change with time or space.

In Section 2 I argue that the widespread assumption that the “evidence” for the things called ‘propositions’ comes from our ordinary way of speaking and the widespread assumption that these things enjoy the properties I–IV can’t both be right. If the only “evidence” at our disposal comes from our ordinary way of speaking, it seems that we have no reason to believe that there are Ps. This suggests that the current use of the word ‘proposition’ is more theoretically loaded than it is commonly assumed. Conversely, if we are justified to believe that there are Ps, there must be good arguments in support of them which do not rest simply on our ordin-

ary way of speaking. In Sections 3, 4 and 5 I examine some well-known arguments which may be taken to support Ps and do not rest simply on our ordinary way of speaking. It is my purpose to show that they aren't good arguments.²

2. WHAT DOES AND WHAT DOES NOT FOLLOW FROM THE ARGUMENTS CONSIDERED

The *prima facie* arguments considered rest on the same intuitive basis. Any non-philosopher is willing to allow that what we say, think, assert, and so on, is other than the act of saying, thinking, asserting it. One thing is to say that so-and-so, another thing is what is said, namely, that so-and-so. What is said on a certain occasion by a certain speaker can equally be said on other occasions and by other speakers, or can be the object of a linguistic or mental act of a different kind. The same goes for what is thought, asserted, and so on. It is not clear whether there is something else to say besides this about the intuitive repertoire of the non-philosopher. However, *this* seems enough to ensure the initial plausibility of the arguments considered. Once one agrees that the things we think, mean, assert, and so on – as they are identified by means of that-clauses – are other than the act of thinking, meaning, asserting them, and so on, one can easily “admit” things such as objects of thought, sentence meanings, statements, or referents of that-clauses.

Certainly, from the fact that we ordinarily talk of things thought, meant, asserted, and so on, as if they were cats or trees it doesn't follow that there *really* are objects of thought, sentence meanings, statements or referents of that-clauses in the sense in which there are cats or trees. It is a substantive question whether or not our ordinary way of talking is to be taken seriously. But the point I want to make is a different one. Instead of asking whether the way we ordinarily talk of things thought, meant, asserted, and so on, is to be taken seriously, let us ask *what* exactly follows from the assumption that it is to be taken seriously. It seems to me that the arguments considered establish nothing that is not already contained in the intuitive basis that ensures their initial plausibility: they show *at most* that there are *things* we think, mean, assert, and so on, where the things in question are what we identify by means of that-clauses.

Nothing follows from those arguments about the nature of the things we think, mean, assert, and so on. It is certainly plausible to attribute properties to these things, as we normally attach predicates or predicate-like expressions to that-clauses. For example, the claim that the things we think, mean, assert, and so on can be true or false is in accordance with our

use of the expressions ‘is true’ and ‘is false’, as we normally attach these expressions to that-clauses. But there doesn’t seem to be much left to say about what the things which possess those properties *are*. The more specific point which concerns us here is that from the arguments considered we cannot draw the conclusion that the things we think, mean, assert, and so on are Ps.

To put it another way, let us stipulate that *propositions* are the things which the arguments considered seem to be about. Then, nothing in those arguments leads us to think that propositions enjoy the properties I–IV. First of all, nothing leads us to think that propositions are *language-independent* entities. Suppose Mary utters the sentence

- (1) the sea is blue

It may be plausible to assume that what Mary asserted is other than her act of uttering (1) or than (1) itself. Accordingly, it may be plausible to conclude that there is something Mary asserted, call it the proposition *that the sea is blue*. But the claim that the proposition that the sea is blue is language-independent does not follow from that conclusion, and certainly has much less intuitive appeal. This shouldn’t surprise us, given that we don’t have a language-independent “access” to the proposition, although we seem to refer to it just as we refer to Mary. Our ways of identifying and describing Mary are to a large extent independent of her being the referent of the word ‘Mary’, in that they can’t be extracted from a simple analysis of our use of the name ‘Mary’ or of any other expression. We can see Mary in front of us or hear her voice. But there seems to be no way of identifying or describing the proposition that the sea is blue independently of its being the referent of the clause ‘that the sea is blue’ or of some other linguistic expression. Apparently, no principled distinction can be drawn between recognizing the proposition that the sea is blue as that very proposition and regarding it as the referent of the clause ‘that the sea is blue’ or of some other linguistic expression. This is not to say that propositions are language-dependent entities because our criteria of identification for them are purely linguistic. From the premise that we have no language-independent “access” to propositions it certainly doesn’t follow that propositions are language-dependent entities. At the same time, however, we’re not entitled to claim that they are language-independent unless some argument is provided.

In the second place, nothing in the arguments considered leads us to think that propositions are *mind-independent* entities. Suppose we take what Mary asserted by uttering (1) to be what Mary believes. Even if we grant that what Mary believes is other than her believing it, and that

what Mary believes can be believed by other persons, from this we cannot draw the conclusion that the proposition that the sea is blue would have existed even if thinkers like Mary or human thought hadn't existed. As in the previous case, our way of identifying and describing propositions does not give us *prima facie* reasons in support of this conclusion.

In the third place, nothing in the arguments considered leads us to think that propositions are structured entities in the sense that they are made out of language-independent constituents of some kind whose combination happens to match the combination of the words occurring in the sentences which express them. The proposition that the sea is blue doesn't have constituents which can be identified or described in a way that is to some extent independent of a simple analysis of (1). We do not identify the proposition that the sea is blue as that very proposition by identifying its constituents and the way they are combined. On the contrary, the only sense in which the proposition that the sea is blue can be said to have constituents is that in which its structure is entirely derived from that of (1).

In the fourth place, propositions don't seem to be *true* or *false* in a sense that substantively differs from that in which sentences can be said to be true or false. The purported difference between Ps and sentences with respect to *truth conditions* is that (a) truth-conditions of sentences are captured by contingent biconditionals, in that they depend on actual linguistic practices, while (b) truth-conditions of Ps are captured by necessary biconditionals, in that they do not depend on such practices. There are reasons to doubt both that (a) is true and that something like (b) holds for propositions.

One may be inclined to endorse (a) on the basis of considerations about linguistic counterfactuals. English speakers, one may reason, could have used the words occurring in (1) in a different way, and if they had,

(2) 'the sea is blue' is true iff the sea is blue

could have come out false. But whether such counterfactuals make (2) false depends on the way we describe the counterfactuals themselves, where the way we describe them depends in turn on what we take a language like English to be. If we think that what counts as relevant to the individuation of a language are syntactic considerations only, we regard (1) as a purely syntactic entity capable of having different meanings in different "possible worlds". Instead, if we think that both syntax and semantics are relevant to the individuation of a language, we take (1) to be defined both by its syntax and by its actual meaning. In the first case we can account for the counterfactuals under consideration in terms of possible worlds in which the same sentence has a different meaning. Then (2) comes out false in

some of these worlds and therefore contingently true. In the second case (1) keeps its actual meaning across worlds. Then (2) comes out true in all possible worlds and therefore necessarily true.

Whether biconditionals such as (2) are necessary or not essentially depends on which of the two ways of treating languages is adopted, and it is not obvious that the first way is to be preferred. It is in general quite plausible to describe English as a language which has certain syntax and certain semantics, and to describe a language with different semantics as a language different from English. More specifically, our notion of the truth condition of a sentence seems to be essentially bound to our understanding of the actual meaning of that sentence. When we think about the truth conditions of (1) we think about possible states of affairs in which the sea would have been blue, i.e., possible worlds in which the sentence *as we understand it* is true, no matter what the speaker do or whether they exist in those worlds. On the other hand, if we adopt the first solution we are committed to the claim that the truth condition of a certain sentence in a certain possible world is always relative to the meaning of that sentence in that possible world, where the meaning of that sentence in that possible world depends on the linguistic practices of the speakers of that possible world. But there are complications to work out with this claim. There are possible worlds in which the sentence doesn't belong to the linguistic repertoire of any speaker, and possible worlds in which it is used in more than one identifiable way.³ Therefore, it is far from evident that (2) is contingent. More generally, it is far from evident that (a) is true. But independently of whether (a) is true, we have no reason to think that something like (b) holds for propositions. As propositions are identified by means of embedded sentences, it is quite plausible to take their truth conditions to be sensitive to the way those sentences are used. From this point of view the question whether (2) is necessary or not is wrongheaded. If the second solution sketched above is adopted, both truth conditions of sentences and truth conditions of propositions turn out to be specified by necessary biconditionals. Instead, if one wants to treat the meaning of sentences as world-relative, propositions turn out to be world-relative as well. The proposition *that p* is identified in a certain possible world by means of the clause 'that *p*' which embeds the sentence '*p*' as it is used by the speakers of that possible world. Therefore, the truth condition of the proposition *that p* in that possible world depends on the way '*p*' is used in it. That is, the truth condition of a certain proposition in certain possible world always coincides with the truth condition in that possible world of the sentence embedded in the that-clause which refers to the proposition.

The purported difference between Ps and sentences with respect to their *truth value* is that Ps have it absolutely, whereas sentences have it relatively to the circumstances in which they are uttered. But we seem to have no *prima facie* reason to think that propositions have their truth value absolutely. Take the following case. Tom utters the sentence 'it is raining' at 4 p.m. Half an hour later Tom utters the same sentence. We may report Tom as saying the first time *that it rains at 4 p.m.*, and the second time *that it rains at 4.30 p.m.* Otherwise, we may report Tom as saying on both occasions *that it is raining*. It is in accordance with the first report to say that on the two occasions Tom stated different propositions, whereas it is in accordance with the second report to say that Tom stated the same proposition. Our way of identifying propositions by means of that-clauses leaves indeterminate whether the proposition stated by Tom on the first occasion is the same as the proposition stated by Tom on the second occasion. Therefore, it leaves indeterminate whether the proposition stated by Tom on the first occasion has a fixed truth value. For if Tom stated two different propositions on the two occasions, the proposition he stated on the first occasion has a fixed truth value: if it rains at 4 p.m., it is always true that it rains at 4 p.m. The same goes for the proposition stated on the second occasion. On the contrary, if Tom stated the same proposition on both occasions, the proposition in question can change its truth value, as it may be the case that it rains at 4 p.m. but is sunny at 4.30 p.m. Nothing in our way of identifying propositions by means of that-clauses forces us to conclude that they have their truth value absolutely.

Besides, sometimes we seem to presuppose that propositions can change truth value. For example, we use expressions such as 'it is no longer true that so-and-so'. More generally, whenever we say that a certain object has a certain property we seem to say something that may be true at a certain time and false at another time, for the object may have that property at a certain time and lack it at another time. One can certainly paraphrase expressions which seem to presuppose truth value changes in terms of expressions which do not seem to presuppose such changes. For example, a sentence of the form 'at time *t* it was true that *a* is *F*, but now it is no longer true' can be rephrased as 'it is true that *a* was *F* at time *t*, but it is false that *a* is still *F*'. This is the kind of paraphrase usually recommended by the advocates of Ps, who believe that truth value changes concern the linguistic expression of Ps rather than Ps themselves. However, it seems that the advocates of Ps have a motivation for preferring expressions which do not presuppose truth value changes to expression which presuppose such changes only in that they already assume that Ps have their truth value absolutely. For the simple fact that expressions of

the second kind can be paraphrased in terms of expressions of the first kind shows nothing about the truth value of propositions. There seems to be no reason for taking expressions of the first kind to have some priority upon expressions of the second kind unless it is assumed what expressions of the second kind seem to question, namely, that propositions have their truth value absolutely.

3. THE INDISPENSABILITY ARGUMENT

The case for Ps is sometimes presented in the form of an indispensability argument, that is, an argument that we should allow that there are Ps because doing so is indispensable for certain purposes. As the purposes in question are said to be *explanatory* purposes, the argument takes the form of an *inference to the best explanation*. The principle of inference to the best explanation underlies much of our knowledge of the physical world. If we have a good explanation of a large class of phenomena that we are unwilling to give up, and a certain claim is an assumption that appears in the explanation, then we have reason to believe that claim. For example, in 1841 an astronomy student conjectured that some perturbations in the motion of Uranus could be caused by an unknown planet, and located the supposed planet by means of calculations. Some years later the planet Neptune was found in the position expected. Having in mind this kind of reasoning, some philosophers talk of the supposition that there are Ps as if it explained some phenomena that wouldn't be explained otherwise.

It is not clear to me how to make sense of such talk. First of all, what kind of *explanation* is provided by the supposition that there are Ps? Apparently, it is not the same kind of explanation that we find in the empirical sciences. When a scientific explanation is formulated in order to account for some class of phenomena, it is taken for granted that the assumptions that appear in the explanation are capable – at least in principle – of being subjected to empirical confirmation. But philosophers don't seem to expect empirical evidence to confirm the supposition that there are Ps. That is, they don't expect that some day someone will find the entities they talk about and show that Frege was right, just as astronomers can find a planet and show that a certain astronomy student was right. Not only philosophers don't seem to expect that the supposition that there are Ps be empirically testable, but those who try to give empirically testable explanations of language don't seem to make that supposition. Chomsky and his followers regard language as an element of the natural world, to be studied by ordinary methods of empirical inquiry. But as far as I know they construct their explanatory theories without resorting to Ps.⁴ Secondly, what kind of

phenomena are explained by the supposition that there are Ps? At a guess, they must be *linguistic* phenomena. However, the linguistic phenomena that philosophers have in mind are not things like sounds or marks, or the linguistic behavior of the speakers of this or that language. Rather, it seems that what they have in mind are linguistic facts *as* they are described in ordinary language.

Then, both the sense of ‘explanation’ and the sense of ‘phenomenon’ involved here are quite peculiar. Presumably, ‘to explain linguistic phenomena such-and-such’ is to be taken as meaning ‘to provide a simple body of principles on the basis of which we can make sense of, or account for, our ordinary way of speaking about such-and-such things’. But what things? It seems that the things at issue are those which made their appearance in the *prima facie* arguments considered above: mental states, meanings, statements, that-clauses, and so on. What is said to be in need of explanation is, say, the fact that certain mental states seem to have objects, or the fact that some sentences seem to have more than one meaning, or the fact that certain sentences are true in certain circumstances and false in other circumstances, or the fact that that-clauses seem to occur as singular terms, and so on.

But if the phenomena in need of explanation are *these*, then I don’t see how the principle of inference to the best explanation can support the claim that there are Ps. An inference to the best explanation is an abductive inference from the assumption that a certain supposition explains (better than other suppositions) certain phenomena to the conclusion that the supposition is true. If the supposition concerns the existence of a certain object, the argument goes as follows: phenomena of the class A may be explained if we suppose that there is an x which has the properties F_1, \dots, F_n , therefore x exists. The properties F_1, \dots, F_n are attributed to x *in that* they play some role in the explanation of phenomena of the class A. For example, if a certain position is assigned to a planet postulated in order to explain the perturbations in the motion of a certain other planet, it is because according to some calculations a planet *in that position* can cause those perturbations. However, no argument for the Ps can be construed in accordance with this pattern. We have a class A of phenomena – the linguistic phenomena under consideration – said to be in need of explanation, and the existence of an x is said to be postulated in order to explain such phenomena. But then we have some properties – the properties I–IV – such that it is not clear why should they be attached to x . We are entitled to assign properties to x only to the extent to which they play some role in the explanation of phenomena of the class A. But the properties I–IV play *no role at all* in the explanation of the linguistic phenomena at issue. It is clear from what has

been said about the arguments considered above that there is no need to resort to entities with the properties I–IV in order to “accommodate” those phenomena. For example, the inference from ‘Tom believes that the sea is blue’ to ‘there is something that Tom believes’ is “explained” if there is a certain thing that Tom believes. There is no explanatory gain in supposing that the thing in question has the properties I–IV.

An attribution of properties which play no explanatory role to a postulated object can be justified only in case there is some other way of identifying or describing that object. Once an object x has been postulated in order to explain phenomena of the class A , it may happen that we manage to identify or describe x independently of that explanation, thereby obtaining a confirmation of our initial supposition. Thus, the independent identification or description of x may enable us to attribute other properties to it, say, G_1, \dots, G_n . For example, we can find a way of directly observing a planet postulated in order to explain the perturbations in the motion of a certain other planet, and by directly observing it we may discover that its surface has certain features. However, in the case of P_s this possibility is precluded. We have no way of describing the objects that we “postulate” as the things we believe, say, assert, and so on (as we identify them by means of that-clauses), that is not reducible to their being the things we believe, say, assert, and so on (as we identify them by means of that-clauses). That is, we have no way of identifying or describing x that is not reducible to “the object that plays such and such role in the explanation of phenomena of the class A ”. What we can say about x is extracted from the same class of phenomena that x is supposed to explain.

Thus, neither the attribution of the properties I–IV to the objects “postulated” as the things we say, believe, assert, and so on, can be justified on the basis of some explanatory role (like the properties F_1, \dots, F_n above), nor can it be justified on the basis of some independent way of identifying those objects (like the properties G_1, \dots, G_n above). As propositions have been defined as the things we say, believe, assert, and so on, we may conclude that the claim that propositions are P_s is unjustified. This does *not* amount to saying that *propositions*, rather than P_s , explain the linguistic phenomena that P_s are usually taken to explain. Just because propositions are defined in terms of the linguistic phenomena said to be in need of explanation, talk of propositions does not in fact explain anything.

4. THE ARGUMENT FROM THE OBJECTIVITY OF TRUTH

I believe that the inclination towards the assumption that propositions are language-independent and mind-independent entities comes at least in part

from a well known consideration which has traditionally found favor with admirers of Logic and Mathematics, and has never lost appeal despite its venerable age. It is the consideration that the *truth* of a proposition is independent of its being recognized by us. Frege seems to appeal to this line of argument. The Pythagorean theorem, Frege says, is true independently of whether anyone takes it to be true. Just as a planet was in interaction with other planets even before anyone saw it, the Pythagorean theorem was true even before the time when it was discovered. The claim that this remark is intended to support or clarify is that the Pythagorean theorem is itself something that existed before and independently of our discovering it.⁵ It is not difficult to find similar considerations in the more recent literature or to hear them in discussion. The proposition that so-and-so, it is often said, is independent of its being expressed by the English sentence 'so-and-so' or by some other foreign sentence. For even before the human race made its appearance on Earth it was already true that so-and-so, and even if speakers of English or any other language hadn't existed, it still would have been true that so-and-so.

This, roughly, is the line of argument. But unfortunately for Frege and his followers, it isn't a good line of argument. Whether considerations about the truth of a proposition in the past or in possible states of affairs are relevant to the question about the existence of that proposition in the past or in possible states of affairs depends on what it is for a truth bearer to be true in the past or in possible states of affairs. However it seems that the most plausible sense in which a truth bearer can be said to be true in the past or in possible states of affairs fails to support conclusions about its existence in the past or in possible states of affairs.

A truth bearer is an entity of some kind to which truth can be ascribed. The condition under which a truth bearer is true is its *truth condition*. For example, a truth bearer that is true just in case the sea is blue is a truth bearer that has the sea being blue as its truth condition. As the sea is indeed blue, the truth bearer in question is true in the world as it is now. Its truth condition is satisfied by the way things are. It is commonly assumed that truth bearers can also be evaluated with respect to states of affairs different from the actual and present one. That is, instead of wondering whether things as they are make a given truth bearer true, one may wonder whether the way things were in the past (*will be* in the future), or the way things *could have been*, would have been such as to make it true, i.e. whether those circumstances would have been such as to satisfy its truth condition. Just as for a truth bearer to be true in the present and actual state of affairs is for its truth condition to be satisfied in it, for a truth bearer to be true

in a state of affairs different from the present and actual one – call it an “alternative” state of affairs – is for its truth condition to be satisfied in it.

This turns out to be clear if states of affairs are conceived of as possible worlds in modal logic. For a formula Fa to be true in a certain possible world is for its truth condition to be satisfied in that possible world, that is, for the referent of a to exist in that possible world and belong to the extension of F in that possible world. The same goes for a truth bearer that has the sea being blue as its truth condition. For such truth bearer to be true in an alternative state of affairs is for the sea to be blue in that state of affairs. Since the sea was blue seven years ago, the truth bearer in question comes out true if evaluated with respect to the world as it was at that time. Instead, the truth bearer comes out false if evaluated with respect to a possible world where the sea is yellow. There is a sense in which we may want to say that our truth bearer *was* true seven years ago: it is the sense in which seven years ago the world was such as to satisfy its truth condition. Similarly, there is a sense in which we may want to say that our truth bearer *would have been* false if the sea had been yellow: it is the sense in which the way things would be in case the sea were yellow would be such as not to satisfy its truth condition.

As the question about the truth of truth bearers in alternative states of affairs depends on their truth conditions being satisfied in those states of affairs, it is irrelevant to that question what truth bearers *are*. On the contrary, the question about the existence of truth bearers in alternative states of affairs depends *just* on what truth bearers are. Suppose that a truth bearer is a contingent entity which exists in virtue of linguistic practices of some kind. Then, its existence in a certain state of affairs depends on the existence of such linguistic practices in that state of affairs. Suppose instead that a truth bearer is an entity which enjoys some form of language-independence. Then, the truth bearer can exist even if no linguistic practice exists. Obviously, considerations about the satisfaction of truth conditions in alternative states of affairs are irrelevant to the question about the existence of truth bearers in those states of affairs. Take a truth bearer which has the sea being blue as its truth condition. Its existence in a certain alternative state of affairs does not depend on whether the sea is or isn't blue in that state of affairs. In substance, the truth of a truth bearer in alternative states of affairs depends on the satisfaction of its truth condition in those states of affairs, no matter what its ontological status is, while its existence in those states of affairs depends on its ontological status, no matter whether its truth condition is satisfied in them.

Therefore, from considerations about the *truth* of a truth bearer in alternative states of affairs we are not entitled to draw conclusions about

its *existence* in those states of affairs. Let us assume that the Pythagorean theorem is eternally true. As the theorem is true just in case the sum of the squares of the catheti of a right-angle triangle equals the square of the hypotenuse, this means that at every time the way things are is such that the sum of the squares of the catheti of a right-angle triangle equals the square of the hypotenuse. Now let us take a time before that at which the theorem was formulated. It follows from our assumption that the truth condition of the theorem was satisfied by the way things were at that time. Then, it is right to say that the theorem was true *before* we discovered it. It is also right to say that the theorem was, and indeed is, true *independently* of our taking it to be true. This means that its truth condition is satisfied independently of us. Certainly, the truth condition itself depends on the theorem, and the theorem was formulated by us. But the fact *that* the condition is satisfied by no means depends on us. The crucial point is that from the premise that the Pythagorean theorem was true before we formulated it and independently of our recognizing its truth we cannot draw the conclusion that before we formulated it and independently of this formulation the world contained a certain entity that was the Pythagorean theorem. The same goes for possible states of affairs. It seems correct to assume that the truth condition of the Pythagorean theorem would have been satisfied even if human beings had never existed. Therefore, it seems correct to say that the theorem would have been true even if human beings had never existed. But this does not entail that even if human beings had never existed the world would still contain a certain entity, the Pythagorean theorem.

It may be the case that the confusion between truth and existence arises because of a certain amount of ambiguity in our way of speaking. Sometimes the word 'truth' stands for the property of being true, as in 'the truth of the Pythagorean theorem'. At other times it stands for that which is true, as in 'God's truth'. In the first case truth is the truth *of* a proposition, whereas in the second case it is the truth that is a proposition. Thus, the use of the word 'truth' in expressions like 'truth is discovered, not invented' or 'there are nondenumerably many truths about numbers' can be misleading. One thing is to say something about the truth of a proposition, quite another thing is to say something about a true proposition.⁶ Just as the substantive 'truth', the predicate 'true' can be used in a misleading way. It might seem that saying that a truth bearer was true two years ago amounts to saying that two years ago the truth bearer *had* the property of being true. Similarly, it might seem that saying that a truth bearer would have been false if the sea had been yellow amounts to saying that in case the sea were yellow the truth bearer *would lack* the property of being true. In other terms, it might seem that truth in alternative states of affairs is a property which is

possessed by truth bearers *in* those state of affairs, more or less in the same way in which the property of being blue is possessed by the sea. If this were the case, the existence of a truth bearer in a given state of affairs would be entailed by its truth in that state of affairs. Note, among other things, that what holds for truth holds for falsity: just as the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$ would exist in all possible world in order to be true in those worlds, the proposition that $2 + 2 = 5$ and infinitely many other propositions would exist in all possible worlds in order to be false in them. However, we have no reason to think that a truth bearer can be true in alternative states of affairs in the same sense in which the sea is blue in those states of affairs. This seems clear if we think about sentences of formal or natural languages. To say that a formula Fa is true in a possible world does *not* amount to saying that *in that possible world* there is a certain thing that is the formula Fa and this thing has the property of being true. Similarly, to say that the sentence

(1) the sea is blue

is true in possible worlds where the sea is blue does *not* amount to saying that *in those worlds* there is a certain thing that is the sentence (1) and this thing has the property of being true. All that has to exist in a possible world for (1) to be true in that world is neither more nor less than what has to exist in it for the sea to be blue.

One might still contend that there is an important difference between the case of sentences and that of propositions, precisely in that propositions enjoy a different ontological status from that of sentences. Unlike sentences, one might say, propositions are true *and* exist independently of us, in such a way that their truth and their existence come together. But in this case some independent argument is to be provided in order to show that propositions enjoy such a privileged ontological status. Therefore, this line of resistance wouldn't undermine what has been said about the weakness of the argument from the Objectivity of Truth. If it is really the case that propositions are entities that have always existed and could exist even if there were no speakers or thinkers, certainly it isn't the consideration about the objectivity of their truth that shows they are.

5. MODAL ARGUMENTS

The previous remarks about the argument from the Objectivity of Truth are relevant to the evaluation of other arguments that have been offered in support of the claim that propositions are language-independent and mind-independent entities. The reason is that these other arguments seem to rest

on the same assumption that underlies the argument from the Objectivity of Truth, namely, the assumption that a truth bearer has to exist in a certain possible world in order to be true in that possible world. One is the argument based on the apparently unproblematic equivalence between sentences containing that-clauses and sentences not containing them. The central assumption is that 'it is true that p ' is trivially or pleonastically equivalent to ' p '. In accordance with this assumption, one may reason as follows. Since

(3) it is true that the sea is blue

is a pleonastic equivalent of

(1) the sea is blue

whenever we are entitled to say that the sea is blue we are also entitled to say that it is true that the sea is blue. Now suppose that there were neither speakers nor thinkers. It could still be the case that the sea is blue, and hence it could still be the case that it is true that the sea is blue. Therefore, the thing to which the clause 'that the sea is blue' refers – the proposition that the sea is blue – does not depend on human language or thought more than the sea does. The idea that the language-independence and mind-independence of propositions goes together with the equivalence between 'it is true that p ' and ' p ' made its appearance in the works of George E. Moore and Arthur N. Prior, and has been recently dusted off by Stephen Schiffer.⁷

What has been said in Section 4 suggests that this idea rests on a confusion between two distinct and independent questions. The pleonastic equivalence between 'it is true that p ' and ' p ' may ensure that a counterfactual sentence which involves no reference to a proposition is pleonastically equivalent to a counterfactual sentence which does involve such reference. If we can say that the sea would be blue in such-and-such circumstances, we can also say that it would be true that the sea is blue in such-and-such circumstances. But this shows *at most* that the truth of a proposition is a language-independent and mind-independent matter, i.e., that a proposition can be true in possible worlds without speakers or thinkers. As we saw, nothing follows from this about its existence in those possible worlds.

It might still be argued that even if the language-independence and mind-independence of propositions doesn't immediately follow from the equivalence between 'it is true that p ' and ' p ', it follows from that equivalence plus a little logic:

(4) necessarily, p or not p

- (5) necessarily, that p is true or that not p is true
- (6) necessarily, that p is true or that p is not true
- (7) (the proposition) that p exists in all possible worlds

From (4) and the equivalence between ‘it is true that p ’ and ‘ p ’ we get (5). From (5) we easily get (6), which in turn entails (7). It follows from (7) that propositions exist whatever linguistic practices do or do not obtain.⁸ However, this argument doesn’t fare better than the previous one. To simplify, let us suppose that ‘ p ’ has logical form Fa . One way of giving the truth conditions of a sentence of logical form Fa and its negation $\neg Fa$ is that of saying that Fa is true just in case the referent of a belongs to the class of things that are F , false just in case the referent of a does not belong to the class of things that are F , and that $\neg Fa$ is true just in case Fa is false. In this case, both the truth of Fa and the truth of $\neg Fa$ in a possible world w presuppose the existence of the referent of a in w . The same goes for the truth in w of the disjunction

$$(8) \quad Fa \vee \neg Fa$$

For (8) is true in w just in case either Fa is true in w or $\neg Fa$ is true in w . But this means that the truth of

$$(9) \quad \Box(Fa \vee \neg Fa)$$

presupposes the existence of the referent of a in all possible worlds, as (9) is true just in case (8) is true in all possible worlds. Then, (4) turns out *not* to be true. For example, there are worlds in which the sea doesn’t exist, and in those worlds the disjunction ‘either the sea is blue or it is not the case that the sea is blue’ is not true. From this it follows that the disjunction is not necessarily true.⁹

The other way of giving the truth condition of a sentence of logical form Fa and its negation $\neg Fa$ is that of saying that Fa is true just in case there is an object x such that x is the referent of a and x belongs to the class of things that are F , false otherwise, and that $\neg Fa$ is true just in case Fa is false. In this case the falsity of Fa – hence, the truth of $\neg Fa$ – in a possible world w covers both the case in which the referent of a exists in w and doesn’t belong to the class of things that are F in w , and the case in which the referent of a does not exist in w . Therefore, the existence of the referent of a in w is *not* presupposed by the truth in w of (8). This means that the truth of (9) does *not* presuppose the existence of the referent of a in

all possible worlds. Accordingly, (4) turns out to be true. For example, in all possible worlds either (1) is true or its negation is true. However, if the truth conditions of ‘ p ’ and ‘not p ’ are given this way, the same treatment must be given of the apparent atomic sentences occurring in (6), i.e., ‘that p is true’ and ‘that p is not true’. This is to say that the existence of the referent of ‘that p ’ is not presupposed by the disjunction ‘that p is true or that p is not true’, as it is not presupposed by the second disjunct. Then, just as (4) does not entail the existence in all possible worlds of the referent of the singular term occurring in ‘ p ’, (6) does not entail the existence in all possible worlds of the proposition that p . That is, (7) does not follow from (6). In short, according to the first way of giving the truth conditions of ‘ p ’ and ‘not p ’ (4) is not true, whereas according to the second way (4) is true but (7) does not follow from (6). This amounts to saying that in the first case the argument is unsound, whereas in the second is invalid.

A more articulated modal argument in support of Ps has been offered by George Bealer. In accordance with the assumption that expressions such as ‘true’, ‘necessary’ and ‘possible’ are predicates which can be attached to that-clauses, Bealer takes it that an atomic sentence $F[p]$, where F is one of such predicates and $[p]$ is a that-clause embedding the sentence ‘ p ’, is true just in case there is something that $[p]$ designates and F applies to that thing. If we add to this that an existential sentence

$$\exists x(x = [p] \wedge Fx)$$

is true just in case there is something that $[p]$ designates and F applies to that thing, we get the following biconditional.

$$(B) \quad F[p] \leftrightarrow \exists x(x = [p] \wedge Fx)$$

Bealer says that (B) is logically true, as it is obtained by “general semantical considerations concerning the canonical truth conditions of the indicated sentences”. Then, the argument goes as follows. Suppose that we modalize both sides of (B). For the left-hand side we get

$$(0) \quad \Box F[p].$$

For the right-hand side we have two alternatives:

$$(a) \quad \Box \exists x(x = [p] \wedge Fx)$$

$$(b) \quad \exists x(x = [p] \wedge \Box Fx)$$

(a) and (b) correspond to the two different ways of taking the scope of the singular term $[p]$. Now let us suppose that ‘ p ’ is a necessarily true sentence, say, $\forall x(x = x)$. Then, necessarily, it is possible that p . That is:

$$(10) \quad \Box \text{possible } [p]$$

It follows from the modalized biconditional that either

$$(10a) \quad \Box \exists (z = [p] \wedge \text{possible } z)$$

or

$$(10b) \quad \exists z (z = [p] \wedge \Box \text{possible } z)$$

or both must be true. If (10a) is true we get

$$\Box \exists z (z = [p])$$

This is to say that the referent of $[p]$ exists necessarily. But if the referent of $[p]$ exists necessarily, Bealer argues, it cannot be a linguistic token or something constituted by linguistic tokens, for linguistic tokens do not exist necessarily. Nor can it be an entity which depends for its existence on the mental or linguistic activity of contingent agents such as ourselves. Therefore, if (10a) is true any nominalist or conceptualist account of the referents of that-clauses must be wrong. The only alternative compatible with such an account seems to be (10b). However, according to Bealer there are cases in which (b) fails, namely, those in which that-clauses contain externally quantifiable variables. Take

$$(11) \quad \Box \forall y \text{ possible } [y = y]$$

In order to give a reading of (11) analogous to (10b) one has to say that necessarily, for all y , there is an actually existing object z such that z is the referent of the singular term $[y = y]$ and z is possible. But no satisfactory account of this supposed z is available to the nominalist. Considerations about the referential resources of our language suggest that z can't be made out of linguistic tokens: there are not enough names or descriptions in our language for every object y . Nor can z be a mind-dependent entity, for what holds for linguistic tokens holds for ideas or other contingent entities. Therefore, (b) is not a viable option for the nominalist. As nominalism is incompatible with (a), nominalism must be wrong.¹⁰

One step of Bealer's argument which is not very clear is that from the premise that (B) is logically true to the conclusion that $\Box F[p]$ must be

equivalent either to (a) or to (b) or to both. On the one hand, there seems to be a reasoning that leads to the conclusion that $\Box F[p]$ is equivalent to (a). One might assume that (B) is *necessarily* true in virtue of its being logically true. That is,

$$\Box(F[p] \leftrightarrow \exists x(x = [p] \wedge Fx))$$

To this assumption one could add the assumption that given any two formulas ϕ and ψ , from

$$\Box(\phi \leftrightarrow \psi)$$

we can derive

$$\Box\phi \leftrightarrow \Box\psi.$$

For

$$\Box(\phi \rightarrow \psi) \rightarrow (\Box\phi \rightarrow \Box\psi)$$

is a basic axiom schema of modal propositional logic. These two assumptions taken together entail that $\Box F[p]$ is equivalent to (a). However, nothing follows from this reasoning about (b). On the other hand, there seems to be a different reasoning that leads to the conclusion that $\Box F[p]$ is equivalent to (b). If $\Box F$ is treated as a complex predicate that applies to the referent of $[p]$, $\Box F[p]$ can be reduced to a sentence of logical form $F[p]$. Call G the complex predicate $\Box F$. If we replace $\Box F$ with G in (0) we get $G[p]$. It follows from (B) that the latter is equivalent to

$$\exists x(x = [p] \wedge Gx).$$

If now we replace G with $\Box F$ we obtain (b). Hence, $\Box F[p]$ is equivalent to (b). However, nothing follows from this reasoning about (a). It is not clear what exactly Bealer has in mind. If it is assumed that (B) is necessarily true, the conclusion immediately follows that (10a) is true. But in this case all the considerations advanced by Bealer about (b) and (11) turn out to be irrelevant. On the contrary, if it is *not* assumed that (B) is necessarily true, the only conclusion that can follow is that (10b) is true. But in this case it is not clear how (10b) can be regarded as an alternative to (10a).¹¹

Independently of what Bealer has in mind, the question may be raised whether or not it is right to assume that (B) is necessarily true. As propositions are truth bearers, it seems that the only reason one may have to regard (B) as necessarily true is that one regards

$$(B^*) \quad Ft \leftrightarrow \exists x(x = t \wedge Fx)$$

as necessarily true, where F is ‘true’, ‘possible’ or ‘necessary’ and t stands for a truth bearer. (B^*) is necessarily true only if $\Box Ft$ is equivalent to $\Box \exists x(x = t \wedge Ft)$. This equivalence presupposes in turn (and follows from) the assumption that the truth conditions of modal sentences in which ‘true’, ‘possible’ or ‘necessary’ are attached to terms for truth bearers are in all respects analogous to those of modal sentences in which ordinary predicates are attached to ordinary singular terms. For example, the truth condition of (10) must be analogous to that of ‘necessarily, the sea is blue’. Or, equivalently, ‘possible’ must be a predicate exactly in the same sense in which ‘blue’ is a predicate. In order to see whether the sentence (1) is true in a certain possible world one has to see whether the sea exist in that world and belongs to the extension of ‘blue’ (has the property of being blue) in that world. Similarly, to assume that ‘possible’ is like ‘blue’ is to assume that in order to see whether ‘it is possible that p ’ is true in a certain possible world one has to see whether the proposition that p exists in that world and belongs to the extension of ‘possible’ (has the property of being possible) in that world.

However, it is wrong to assume that the analogy holds. We saw that ‘true’ is not like ‘blue’ in this respect. The same goes for ‘possible’ and ‘necessary’. In accordance with the standard account of modal notions, it seems correct to assume that the conditions under which the predicates ‘necessary’ and ‘possible’ apply to truth bearers are to be given in terms of a quantification on possible worlds in which the truth bearers themselves are *true*. That is, a truth bearer is necessary just in case it is true in all possible worlds, possible just in case there is at least one possible world in which it is true. However, if modal predicates (as they apply to truth bearers) are defined in terms of truth in possible worlds, what has been said about ascriptions of truth with respect to possible worlds holds for ascriptions of necessity or possibility (to truth bearers) with respect to possible worlds. To say that a truth bearer is true in a possible world w is to say that its truth condition is satisfied by the way things are in w . It does *not* amount to saying that in w the truth bearer exists and enjoys the property of being true. Similarly, to say that a truth bearer is necessary in w does *not* amount to saying that *in* w the truth bearer exists and enjoys the property of being necessary. The truth bearer is necessary in w just in case it is true in all possible worlds (accessible from w), and in order to be true in all possible worlds (accessible from w) the truth bearer need not exist in those worlds. The same goes for possibility: to say that a truth bearer is possible in w does *not* amount to saying that *in* w the truth bearer exists and enjoys the property of being possible. The truth bearer is possible in w just in case it is true in at least one possible world w' (accessible from w),

and in order to be true in w' the truth bearer need not exist in w' . In other terms, the predicates 'necessary' and 'possible', just as the predicate 'true' do not stand for properties that are possessed by truth bearers *in* possible worlds.

Therefore, $\Box Ft$ does *not* presuppose the existence of the referent of t in all possible worlds. This is to say that $\Box Ft$ is *not* equivalent to $\Box \exists x(x = t \wedge Ft)$. As (B*) is necessarily true only if that equivalence holds, we can conclude that (B*) is not necessarily true. Note that if (B*) *were* necessarily true, the following equivalence would be necessarily true:

'1 = 1' is true iff there is a sentence to which '1 = 1' refers and that sentence has the property of being true.

One could certainly hold that sentences are not truth bearers and deny that the equivalence above is an instance of (B*). But in this case one should be willing to endorse the implausible claim that ascriptions of truth to sentences are to be dismissed as untrue or nonsense. From the necessarily true equivalence above plus the premise that, necessarily, '1 = 1' is true, it would follow that the sentence '1 = 1' exists in all possible worlds, which is quite implausible. (B) is nothing but a special case of (B*). As the assumption that (B*) is necessary is unjustified, I don't see how the assumption that (B) is necessary can be justified.

The moral of the story is that $\Box F[p]$ does *not* entail (a). Therefore, (10) does *not* entail (10a). The necessary existence of the referent of $[p]$ – the proposition that p – is not needed in order for (10) to be true. What (10) says is that it is true in all possible worlds that it is possible that p , i.e., that for every possible world w , it is possible that p in w . To say that it is possible that p in w is to say that there is a possible world w' (accessible from w) such that the proposition that p is true in w' . As ' p ' is *ex hypothesi* a necessarily true sentence, the truth condition of the proposition that p is satisfied in all possible worlds. A fortiori, there is a possible world w' in which it is satisfied. Note that what has been said about (10) applies to (6) above. Independently of the considerations advanced about the argument involving (6), (6) by no means *could* entail the existence of the proposition that p in all possible worlds. For saying that (6) is true amounts to saying that for every possible world w , either it is true in w that p or it is not true in w that p , from which nothing follows about the existence of the proposition that p in w .

What has been said so far entails that (a) – hence, (10a) – is not even an option. It might be objected that even if this is granted, Bealer's considerations about (b) still stand. However, doubt can be raised about the cogency of those considerations. The problem raised by Bealer in connection with

(b) is that in the case of (11) no reading analogous to (10b) is available to the nominalist, for such a reading would require the actual existence of the referent of $[y = y]$. But it is not obvious how considerations about (11) can be relevant to (b), as (11) is *not* a sentence of logical form $\Box F[p]$. Unlike (10), (11) contains no singular terms.¹² The logical form of

$$(12) \quad \forall y (\text{possible } [y = y])$$

which occurs in (11), is $\forall y\phi$. Therefore, the logical form of (11) is $\Box\forall y\phi$. In other words, (11) is not an instance of the left-hand side of the modalized biconditional obtained by (B), whatever its right-hand side may be. Accordingly, no reading of (11) can be regarded as a problematic instance of (b).

At most, (11) could be introduced as problematic of its own, independently of the rest of the argument. But even in this case, it is not obvious that (11) gives troubles to the nominalist. According to the standard interpretation of the quantifier \forall , (12) is true just in case for every possible assignment of value to y , (possible $[y = y]$) turns out to be true with respect to that assignment. It seems correct to say that (12) involves reference to propositions *insofar* as its instances involve reference to propositions. An instance of (12) is an open sentence (possible $[y = y]$), where some object has been assigned to y . It seems to follow from the truth of all such instances that for every object there is a proposition about the self-identity of that object. This is not quite the same thing as to say that there are as many propositions about the self-identity of objects as there are objects. Nothing (in what has been assumed so far about propositions) prevents us from thinking that there is only *one* proposition which is about the self-identity of all objects. But if (12) entails the existence of one proposition about the self identity of all objects, then no problem of insufficiency of linguistic resources arises, as the proposition in question could well be a linguistic entity.

Therefore, in order to get the problems Bealer talks about, (12) has to be read as saying that for each distinct object there is a distinct proposition about the self-identity of that object. If *this* is the reading of (12) to be adopted, in order for (12) to be true all the supposed propositions to which $[y = y]$ refers under every possible assignment of value to y must exist here and now. This means that they must exist independently of our expressions of the form $[p]$, as we don't have expressions of this form for all possible assignment of value to y . But since nothing has been assumed so far about propositions besides their being the referents of expressions of the form $[p]$, it seems legitimate to ask whether or not propositions exist independently of such expressions. If the supposition that they do

is not justified, the assumption that (12) is true (on the reading under consideration) is not justified either.

In substance, whether (12) is true (on the reading under consideration) depends on whether propositions exist independently of that-clauses. This is to say that if one assumes both that the reading of (12) under consideration is the right (and only) one *and* that (12) is true, one must take for granted that propositions exist independently of that-clauses. Since the reading of (12) under consideration is the only reading that can serve Bealer's purpose, Bealer's appeal to (11) rests on the assumption that propositions exist independently of that-clauses. But there isn't much difference between assuming that propositions exist independently of that-clauses and assuming that they exist independently of the fact that contingent being such as ourselves express them or refer to them. And since the latter assumption is just what his argument was intended to establish in the first place, Bealer's appeal to (11) is question-begging. More generally, it seems that if the only assumption that we allow about propositions is that they are referents of that-clauses, modal arguments like those considered are not able to establish their language-independence and mind-independence.

6. THE QUESTION WHETHER THERE ARE PROPOSITIONS

In 1930 Gilbert Ryle published an article called *Are there propositions?* In that article we find an accurate examination of the arguments in support of the doctrine that "there are propositions" and of the objections against it, followed by the outline of a theory of judgement which requires no commitment to that doctrine.¹³ Other philosophers, after Ryle, have taken for granted that there are apparent reasons in support of the things called 'propositions' and apparent reasons against them, and that the answer to the question "Are there propositions?" depends on the weight that is to be assigned respectively to the former and to the latter. It is commonly assumed that the reasons in support of the things called 'propositions' rest on intuitive data or on some "explanation" of such data, whereas the reasons against them rest on troubles arising in connection with their supposed abstractness or identity criteria.

What has been said so far leads us to think that there is something wrong in this way of framing the *pros* and *cons* of the question. Independently of whether the usual considerations about abstractness or identity criteria may rightly count as *cons*, something has to be said about the purported *pros*. The distinction drawn above between propositions and Ps suggests that more attention should be paid to what exactly is the claim

to be established. If “Are there propositions” is taken to mean *Are there propositions?* then it may be right to say that a positive answer can be returned in accordance with our intuitions. The claim that there are propositions draws its intuitive appeal from its being somehow encompassed in our ordinary way of speaking. But just because it is already encompassed in our ordinary way of speaking, it is neither particularly original nor in need of evidence. Perhaps it is not even appropriate to say that we have reasons or arguments for that claim. Certainly, the *prima facie* arguments considered in Sections 1 and 2 may be taken to speak in its favor. But we saw that those arguments establish nothing that is not already contained in the intuitive basis that ensures their initial plausibility. Instead, if “Are there propositions?” is taken to mean – as it seems – *Are there Ps?* then the question is certainly more interesting, but the reasons for taking the answer to be positive are not to be found in intuitive data or in some “explanation” of such data. We saw in Sections 2 and 3 that an appeal to intuitive data or to some “explanation” of such data shows *at most* that there are propositions. What has to be shown in addition is that propositions enjoy the properties I–IV. As the arguments considered in Sections 4 and 5 are not good arguments, some other argument is needed in order to justify that additional claim. Thus, while the claim that there are propositions is at hand but trivial, the claim that there are Ps is more interesting but quite hard to justify, or at least harder to justify than it is commonly assumed. Surprisingly enough, many philosophers seem to worry more about the defense of the first claim than about the defense of the step from this to the second claim.

NOTES

¹ An important exception is provided by the conception of propositions as sets of possible worlds, see Stalnaker 1976.

² Part of the material contained in Sections 2, 3 and 4 appeared in Italian under the title *Proposizioni*, ‘Rivista di filosofia’, 93, 2002, pp. 3–34.

³ Here I follow Casalegno 1997.

⁴ Chomsky is rather explicit on this point in his recent works. See Chomsky 2000.

⁵ Frege 1918, pp. 17–18.

⁶ The same distinction is drawn in Williamson 1968, pp. 144–145.

⁷ Moore 1953, p. 375; Prior 1971, pp. 5–6 and 12; Schiffer 2000, p. 7.

⁸ I find this argument in Schiffer 1996, p. 160.

⁹ Schiffer is aware of this difficulty, *ibid.* footnote 17.

¹⁰ Bealer 1993.

¹¹ Paolo Casalegno drew my attention on this point.

¹² Bealer calls $[y = y]$ a singular term. But however one wants to call it, the point remains that $[y = y]$ is a term in the same sense in which 'the president of y ' is a term. Just as 'the president of y ' refers to no particular president, 'that $y = y$ ' refers to no particular proposition.

¹³ Ryle 1930.

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Manuscript submitted 9 November 2001

Final revision received 17 July 2002

