

Critical Notice: Stalnaker's *Propositions: Ontology and Logic*

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§1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an explosion of work on the metaphysics of propositions. The bulk of this work can best be seen as a response to the seminal contributions of Frege, Russell, and Stalnaker on these topics. And of these three philosophers, I'm confident that it is Stalnaker's work that has had the most direct influence on contemporary formal semanticists, as well as those theorists in adjacent fields who are willing to talk in terms of "propositions". His new book, *Propositions: Ontology and Logic* is an especially welcome contribution. It is the single most detailed discussion to date of, well, a *Stalnakerian* conception of proposition.

Stalnaker's overarching aim is to develop an ontology of propositions, properties, and relations so clear and so minimal that even the staunchest Quinean ought to accept it. In the course of defending his "minimalist" theory of propositions, there are numerous interesting twists and turns. Highlights include: a discussion of Quine on philosophical methodology, focusing on the role of regimentation in the motivation and justification of ontological theories; a response to Quine on the viability of modal logic (spoiler! – he argues the minimalist theory provides the needed foundations); as well as a timely discussion of Quine on the potential pitfalls in developing higher-order logics and how, if we are careful, we can avoid them.

A further highlight is a thorough discussion of how the minimalist framework can be used in defense of *contingentism* – the thesis that 'some things might have failed to exist, including, perhaps, abstract objects such as propositions, properties, and relations... and that there might have been things of all these kinds other than those that actually do exist' [1]). In his defense of contingentism, Stalnaker addresses the question of how a proponent of the thesis ought to view the familiar Kripkean model theory for modal logic and the non-actual possibilities that figure in those models (spoiler! – they ought to view those aspects of the model in a purely instrumentalist fashion). Along the way, we even get an interesting discussion of why we should resist the identification of propositions with functions from possible worlds to truth-values in the way that Stalnaker once endorsed himself (spoiler! Stalnaker's propositions – even *maximally consistent* ones – can be "incomplete" in ways that possible worlds aren't supposed to be).

And there is much more. The book is exceptionally rich and full of careful detail.

I will focus on Stalnaker's primary aim in the book, the development of a minimalist account of propositions, properties, and relations. After sketching the overall account (§2), I'll raise a worry about the underlying motivations for the view (§3), and then make a plug for an alternative minimalist approach to propositional content that both Stalnaker and Quine consider, but reject (§4).

§2. Propositions Regimented

Stalnaker's project is one of *regimentation* in Quine's sense (i.e., *explication* in the sense of Carnap). Stalnaker asks 'how can we, working with the unsystematic, ill-understood, disunified cluster of languages that are available to us, construct, and justify clearer, more precise, and more accurate pictures of the world we find ourselves in?' (39). Following Quine, Stalnaker's answer is that we should proceed by "regimentation": i.e., by constructing perspicuous formal languages in which we can represent our scientific and mathematical theories. In this process, we assess and revise the language and theory we begin with, 'explaining both the semantic structure of the constructed languages and their vocabulary in terms of our pre-theoretical understanding of the natural language we begin with' (p. 39). Crucially, however, this process isn't simply a matter of clearly reporting 'how we do talk'; it can also involve decisions on how we *ought* to talk (40).

According to Quine, the appropriate form for such a regimented theory is a purely extensional predicate logic with identity, where the endorsement of such a theory is a commitment "to the existence of a domain of entities and the admissibility of a family of predicates for characterizing the things in the domain" (41). Stalnaker initially follows suit and introduces his minimalist account in just these terms (the underlying logic of the regimented theory gets much more complex later as it is elaborated).

Stalnaker's simple theory consists of a domain of propositions and sets thereof, as well as two primitive monadic predicates – a truth predicate 'T' and a consistency predicate 'C'. In terms of these primitives, he defines various notions such as *maximal consistency* and *entailment* in terms of which he then presents his minimal theory [(P1)-(P6)]. (He doesn't call the postulated entities "s-propositions"; why I'm doing so will be clear enough in a bit.)

Initial Definitions:

- (D1) Two sets Γ_1 and Γ_2 are *equivalent* iff for every set Δ of s-propositions, $\Gamma_1 \cup \Delta$ is consistent iff $\Gamma_2 \cup \Delta$ is consistent.
- (D2) A set Γ *entails* a proposition x iff $\Gamma \cup \{x\}$ is equivalent to Γ .
- (D3) S-propositions x and y are *contradictories* iff $\{x, y\}$ is inconsistent, but for every consistent set of propositions Γ , either $\Gamma \cup \{x\}$ is consistent, or $\Gamma \cup \{y\}$ is consistent.
- (D4) A set of s-propositions Γ is *maximal consistent* iff it is consistent, and for every proposition x , if $\Gamma \cup \{x\}$ is consistent, then $x \in \Gamma$.
- (D5) An s-proposition x is *necessary* iff x is entailed by every set of propositions.
- (D6) A s-proposition is *maximal consistent* iff it is equivalent to a maximal consistent set

The Minimal Theory (First pass)

- (P1) Every subset of a consistent set of s-propositions is consistent.
- (P2) The set of all true s-propositions is maximal consistent.
- (P3) Every s-proposition has a contradictory.
- (P4) For every set of s-propositions Γ , there is a s-proposition x such that $\{x\}$ is equivalent to Γ .
- (P5) For every s-proposition x , if $\{x\}$ is consistent, it is a subset of a maximal consistent set.
- (P6) For any s-propositions x and y , if $\{x\}$ is equivalent to $\{y\}$, then $x=y$.

The resulting picture is elegant; the postulated entities and the structural relations they bare to one another form a complete Boolean algebra.¹

If we endorse this minimal theory, we can (and Stalnaker urges we ought) make the further working assumption that the sentences of our regimented theory should also *express* such s-propositions. Insofar as we want our regimented claims to have truth-*conditions* (not just truth-values), this move is plausible. S-propositions are then claimed to play two roles in the regimented theory (call it “R”) - they are both the subject matter of the theory, and that which is expressed by the sentences of R.

Stalnaker argues that this further assumption immediately leads to a needed enrichment of the logic for R – we need a modal logic with new modal operators, ‘possibly’ and ‘necessarily’ (this enrichment is defended at length). Since it is a theorem of R that there is just one necessary proposition, we can introduce the modal operators in a simple, and pleasing way: i.e., for any sentence φ , $\Box\varphi$ expresses the necessary proposition if φ expresses the necessary proposition and $\Box\varphi$ expresses the unique impossible proposition if φ expresses a contingent proposition. (p. 56)

Since endorsing such a regimented theory is to undertake a commitment to the existence of a domain of entities and *the admissibility of a family of predicates for characterizing the things in the domain.*, Stalnaker asks: what exactly *are* the admissible predicates?

To make a long (and interesting) story brief, the basic idea is that for a predicate to be admissible, it ‘must bring to the table, implicitly, enough information to determine propositions when that predicate is combined, by the compositional rules of the first-order language, with quantifiers, other predicates that meet the same conditions, and names that refer.’ (128). Stalnaker argues that we should identify two predicates P_1 and P_2 iff they play exactly the exactly the same compositional role in the determination of s-propositions. Stalnaker’s implementation of this suggestion requires that it is not only true that anything that instantiates P_1 also instantiates P_2 ; it must be *necessarily* true that that these predicates be co-instantiated (71).

¹ See Fritz (2021).

Stalnaker then goes on to show various metalogical results concerning the first order modal logic he appeals to in stating his regimentation; he provides a model theory for his regimentation and shows that it (the regimented language) is both sound and complete with respect to this semantics. The discussion is as rewarding as it is tough going and it should help to put to rest any technical worries one might have about this stage of the project.

But, there's even more. Stalnaker then turns to the issue of whether we should also now commit to properties and relations, as well as propositions. Having earlier laid down pristine identity conditions for admissible predicates, it is then 'tempting to think... that this is enough to justify an ontological commitment to entities that correspond to predicates – properties and relations' (128). Stalnaker then explores the enrichments we'd need to make to the logic in order to account for this further commitment. Simplifying, he argues that we should go 'higher order':

To be, on the Quinean meta-ontology, is to be a subject of predication, so if there are properties and relations corresponding to the predicates of a first-order language, there must be a family of predicates applying to those entities... and these, too... will correspond to properties and relations, and that start us off up a hierarchy of properties and relations. (ibid.)

He argues that the appropriate language for describing these matters will be a typed, higher-order modal logic and that if we are sufficiently careful, we can avoid Quine's worries that led him to skepticism regarding such logics.

Can we identify s-propositions with sets of possible worlds (as Stalnaker once famously suggested)? In short, his current answer is "no". In effect, S-propositions – even *maximal* s-propositions – might be "incomplete" in a way that possible worlds are not supposed to be (168-169). The concluding discussion helps to bring into clear relief how Stalnaker's contingentist picture of modal reality differs from that of his rivals.

§3. *Propositions Regimented?*

After first sketching his minimalist account, Stalnaker writes:

The abstract structure of the theory is clear enough, and unproblematic, but the commitment we make is not just to a piece of mathematics. (49)

Given the extraordinary care and detail on display throughout the book, Stalnaker is being much too modest. The minimal theory is not merely 'clear enough'; rather, it is simple, elegant, and expressively rich.

But the crucial philosophical question concerns *what* exactly we are committing to when endorsing this theory. "We need to say what the things are to which we are attributing this structure." (ibid.). Following Quine, Stalnaker suggests:

... we use the resources of the pre-regimented language – its vocabulary and our understanding of it – to specify (roughly) what we are talking about, and then we examine this notion critically, specifying a regimented term that is not claimed to be synonymous with the pre-regimented word, but is a revision of it. (49)

As a first pass, Stalnaker volunteers the following (plausible) informal characterization of our pre-theoretic, pre-explicative notion of a “proposition”:

- (A) “...they are things that are true and false, and so that have [or just *are*] truth conditions...”.
- (B) “They are the contents of thought and speech – things that are conveyed in communication, and that play an essential role in characterizing how we represent the world.” (49).

S-propositions – entities answering to [P1]-[P6] - are offered as a proposed regimentation, or explication, of the entities that – at least pre-theoretically – we take to be abstract, shareable, entities with truth-conditions that are the things we mean and say and the contents of our cognitive attitudes.

The Quinean allows that a successful regimentation can be revisionary. So, the mere fact that Stalnaker’s proposal is clearly so shouldn’t immediately count against it. Notice that the proposed individuation conditions for s-propositions are extremely coarse-grained. According to the minimal theory, all logically equivalent propositions (in the sense of the theory) are identical and there is only one necessary and one impossible proposition. Such a commitment immediately leads to results that are – given our pre-theoretic grip on what a proposition is supposed to be – potentially surprising. For example, on this account the proposition that arithmetic is incomplete and the proposition that water is H₂O are the same proposition (the one necessary proposition) whereas the proposition that every human is made entirely of ice and the proposition that necessarily pugs snore are the same (impossible) proposition.

However vague our pre-theoretic notion of a “proposition” might be, it is a datum that there is no precisification or disambiguation of that notion on which we’d accept such identities.

But this discrepancy between our pre-theoretic notion of a proposition and the post-explicative regimentation offered to us isn’t yet objectionable. After all, we *could* ultimately be led to give up virtually any (all?) of our pre-theoretic intuitions (supposing we are all good Quineans and everything-is-in-principle-revisable) but that isn’t my present concern. Rather, my initial worry is that in any such revisionary project, we run the risk of simply changing the subject matter. That is, any time you allow that a successful regimentation of a pre-theoretic concept might be a *revision*, or a *replacement* of it, you effectively open yourself up to the kind of worry that Strawson once raised for Carnap on “philosophical explication:

“...typical philosophical problems about the concepts used in non-scientific discourse cannot be solved by laying down rules of use of exact and fruitful concepts in science. To do this last is not to solve the typical philosophical problem, but to change the subject.” (1963, p.506)

There are ways for a revisionist regimenter to effectively respond to this sort of worry, but, as best I can see, it requires much more than just providing further details regarding our newly-minted, post-regimented concepts. Rather, what is required is further clarity on both the good and the bad of the pre-regimented concept C with which we start and how exactly the proposed regimentation C+ compares:

What is it good for? – What work does C do for us? What is its explanatory and predictive role? Why is it worth our efforts to try to get clearer on? What do we need to make sure to capture with our post-regimented concept C+?

What is wrong with it? – What exactly is problem with C, though? If there weren't *something* wrong with it – e.g., it's equivocal, or vague, or paradox generating – then why should we replace it?

If C+ has all the good and none of the bad of C, then I'm all for the proposed revision/replacement. But short of that, it is less clear to me how to respond to Strawson's worry. Nothing in Stalnaker's current treatise fully addresses this sort of worry about the project.

On this particular issue, this new book differs in important ways from Stalnaker's *Inquiry* (1984). In that work, Stalnaker suggested that a (correlatively) coarse-grained content is not only well understood, clear, etc. but that *it is all that it is all we need to appeal to in order to make sense of the explanatory role of content* in intentional psychological explanations and the theory of meaning. If *that* had turned out to be so, we would have been a decisive reason for adopting an ontology of coarse-grained contents and accepting whatever revisionary results that might follow. Should that project have been carried through, no one would have lost any sleep over the clear differences between our starting conception of propositional content and what we are being offered to put in its place.

Despite incredible ingenuity, this bold claim has turned out difficult to defend. Early critics – including Field (1986) and Soames (1987) – offered worries that didn't seem to be easily dealt with using the available resources of the theory. But, at any rate, a defense against these sorts of objections is not at all what we get in the present treatise. In the current work, there is not much discussion about the explanatory role of propositions, and what little there is differs greatly in tenor from the earlier writings. For example, we are told that 'this regimented notion of proposition [does] not do all the work that propositions have been asked to do' (127) and it is suggested that the coarse-grainedness of s-propositions might disqualify them as plausible candidates for being the objects of our cognitive attitudes (52). Stalnaker doesn't offer much by way of elaboration for why he is making this concession, or exactly 'what work propositions have been asked to do' that s-propositions are especially ill-suited for. He suggests they might be 'ill-suited to be objects of thought', but, why, exactly?

Perhaps part of the answer is this: whatever else we might say about the explanatory role of our pre-theoretic notion of propositional content, this much seems clear: our attributions of content allow us to categorize (and generalize over) linguistic and mental representations in a way that abstracts from potentially idiosyncratic facts about the medium in which they are given.² We talk of sentences of different languages saying *the same thing*, or agents believing *the same thing*, even though the facts about the relevant particular token representations (those vehicles *with* that content) might differ greatly (and even in cases in which we have no inkling of what the relevant vehicle might be). Appeal to propositional content helps us to keep track of sameness and difference in mental and linguistic representations independently of how they are written, uttered, or inscribed in one's "belief-box". But when we think of the kinds of difference in representational vehicles that matter to us – those differences that we have practical interest in keeping track of – *subject matter* is central (i.e., facts about what those vehicles are *about*). After all, it is the fact that the doctor's belief is *about* medical matters that makes us especially inclined to take her say so as a reason for to form the relevant

² Cf. Hanks (2014) and Buchanan and Grzankowski (2022).

corresponding belief. But, notice that the minimal, s-propositions on offer do not (and cannot) keep track of such difference in subject matter. Consider the proposition that Carla snores and either Pablo likes chasing birds or he doesn't. Any two people who both believe this *must* each have a token belief state that represents, among other things, Carla, snoring, Pablo, and squirrels. But this fact can't easily be accounted for if what they believe are minimal, s-propositions. This is just one especially clear way in which s-propositions differ from our pre-theoretic notion and this difference seems to be of significant explanatory import.

At any rate, s-propositions are offered as a regimentation of our pre-theoretic conception of content, but, as Stalnaker agrees, it is clear that they cannot do everything the former does. How else then might we motivate the suggested revision?

If there were some special reason to think that our pre-theoretic notion of a proposition was irredeemably problematic, that would be enough of a reason to endorse the proposed regimentation in terms of s-propositions (even if we think that the latter can't do everything we asked of the former). One possible line to pursue goes like this: "The difference between s-propositions and our starting, pre-theoretic conception is one of "grain". But, anything more fine-grained than an s-proposition must be structured (e.g., a Russellian proposition). This is, however, problematic since structured propositions lead to the Myhill-Russell Paradox (or some other equally awful thing).

But this line can be resisted on two fronts. First, some recent structured accounts, such as Bacon (forthcoming) look to be consistent and Myhill-Russell free. But, just as importantly, "going more fine-grained" doesn't necessarily mean opting for structured propositions. Some so-called "algebraic approaches" countenance no (mereological or set-theoretic) structure, but nevertheless allow for hyper-intensional distinctions.³ Likewise, Schiffer (2003), Keller (2022), as well as me and Grzankowski (2022), have independently argued for fine-grained, unstructured contents. Of special note here are the truth-maker style accounts developed by Fine (2017) and Yablo (2014). These contents-as-sets-of-possible-truth-makers accounts *are* consistent and specifically designed to help keep track of subject matter, but the sets of possible truth-makers they appeal to are no more structured than are s-propositions.

Stalnaker *is* sensitive to the kind of worry that Strawson raised for Carnap. At the point in the book where he comes closest to explicitly addressing the worry we've been discussing, he writes:

...in our regimented theory we stipulate that propositions should be things that conform to the principle that equivalent propositions are identical, should there be such things. It is recognized that there might be different ways of regimenting the intuitive idea of proposition that we find in our pre-regimented theory, and we don't exclude the possibility that there are alternative ways of regimenting the notion that have finer-grained identity conditions... But part of the motivation for including the postulate in our theory of propositions is that other plausible candidates... would satisfy an equivalence relation of the kind our theory defines, and so would allow for an ontological commitment of the kind of entity our theory hypothesizes. (61)

³ See Bealer (1998).

It's hard to disagree: Russellians and Fregeans alike should accept entities that conform to the principles of Stalnaker's minimal theory. But that is quite a different matter than the issue of whether we ought to accept these new entities to be *propositions*. What we've been discussing is Strawson's worry of "changing the subject" and I'm not sure how the current thought helps on that issue. Notice: any plausible theory of propositions will also need to recognize even coarser equivalence relations than those of the minimal theory. Consider *being equivalent in truth-value*. If a theorist were to claim that the entities that meet this equivalence relation are being offered *as a regimentation of propositions*, we'd rightfully balk. But why? Perhaps we'd feel we've been given a plausible regimentation for reifications of truth and falsity ("The TRUE" and "The FALSE"), but not propositions. I suspect that some will feel similarly about the minimal s-propositions that are being offered to us in this book – happy to accept these entities into their ontology, and maybe even willing to accept these entities as a regimentation of, say, a coarse-grained notion of truth-conditions or states of affairs, but still hesitant about the identification of these entities with propositions.

I hope I don't sound like a spoiled kid at Christmas who didn't get exactly what they wanted. ["You gave me the foundations for modal logic! but what I really, really wanted were the contents of thoughts!"] So, to reiterate, I am happy to accept the principles of the minimal theory and that there are indeed entities that answer to it. Moreover, it is impossible not to be impressed with all that Stalnaker shows you can do with such minimal resources. But for all that, I'm still not sure about propositions. And I hope it is sufficiently clear that this isn't just a verbal question of whether these entities deserve the honorific "proposition". Rather, it's a question about what if anything answers to the explanatory role of our pre-theoretic, pre-explicative notion of propositional content.

At one point, Stalnaker remarks that 'One problem that fuels skepticism about propositions is that they are asked to do too much.' (52). Maybe that's right (I'm sympathetic), but it would have been helpful to hear more on what the potential pitfalls are here and how exactly they help to motivate the revisionary account on offer.

§4. Different Beginnings

A striking feature of Stalnaker's treatise is that it is advertised as a *Quinean* defense of propositions. As Stalnaker emphasizes, Quine himself had little sympathy with propositions (or with much of the machinery that Stalnaker appeals to in the development of the minimal theory). Stalnaker makes a powerful case, however, that even the Quinean *ought* to accept the minimal theory and the logic needed to sustain it.

But why was Quine so skeptical of propositions? It wasn't just that they are abstract. He famously had no problem with sentences, sets, and other abstracta he found especially helpful in his theorizing. Rather, as Stalnaker points out, his worries about propositions ('creatures of darkness') are traceable to two separable strands in his thinking, namely, (i) a background (neo)-Fregean, abstractionist conception of how to justify an ontology of abstracta, and (ii) his skepticism about synonymy. Stalnaker:

Quine is... thinking of a commitment to propositions as motivated by a method of characterizing abstract objects that was pioneered by Frege: one begins with an equivalence relation defined on objects that are already ontologically acceptable, and then introduces a kind of entity in terms of that equivalence relation. ... a

familiar...example that he used is the geometric concept of a direction: one paraphrases 'line A is parallel to line B' as 'the direction of line A = the direction of line B'. The identification of these Fregean Thoughts is supposed to justify the introduction of the abstract objects—directions—by giving them clear identity conditions. Quine would agree that if we had a clear notion of sentence synonymy, we could justify an ontology of propositions by following the Fregean pattern, but we don't. (51)

Neither Quine or Stalnaker seem primarily worried about the Neo-Fregean method for the generation (and justification) of abstracta. Rather, Quine is worried about whether we can make sense of synonymy in the first place. And while Stalnaker is "sympathetic to Quine's rejection of analyticity and synonymy", that isn't his basic worry about the abstractionist alternative to his proposal (ibid.). Rather, he claims that "it is a mistake to think of propositions as entities that are grounded in semantic relations between sentences, rather than as things that sentences may be used to say..." (ibid.) But what, exactly, is the mistake? That is, why is it a mistake to try to give an abstractionist account of propositional content in terms of synonymy or, more generally, the facts about co-representation as we find them?

Oftentimes, the neo-Fregean approach isn't just plausible, it is mandated. For example, once we agree that we can make clear sense of two people being born on the same day, there is not (or at least should not) be any further worry about admitting birthdays into our ontology:

The birthday of A = the birthday of B iff A and B were born on the same calendar day.

This biconditional look necessary, *a priori*, and even analytic. Moreover, its truth seemingly suffices to show that these abstracta appearing on their left-hand sides are no more metaphysically or epistemologically suspect than the resources appealed to on their right-hand. Indeed, it is tempting to say something stronger – these abstraction principles teach us everything there is to know about *what it is* to be a birthday or a direction. If there are entities answering to the left-hand side 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 2020, 120). If you understand the relevant abstraction principle and know what it is for two things to be equivalent in the way required by the right-hand side, you thereby know all there is to know about the abstract objects that answers to the left-hand side.

There is no temptation to think that we need to "explain" or "independently justify" the ontology of birthdays or directions independently of the facts about the relevant equivalence classes we can use those abstracta to help us keep track of. Why should there be a difference in the case of propositional content?

As Field (2017) points out, there are two very different ways we might approach the task of providing a theory of propositional content:

One is to theorize about contents directly, independently of any sentences or internal representations that represent them... The other is more egocentric: start from our own representations... and view all talk of content as some kind of projection from this. (3).

Stalnaker is attracted to the former, but I'm attracted to the latter. The particular way of pursuing Field's suggestion that I favor (and that I've discussed in a series of papers with Alex Grzankowski) is thoroughly neo-Fregean in spirit. In a nutshell, Alex and I argue that despite numerous disagreements in the literature about what propositions *really* are – cognitive act types, *à la* Hanks and Soames, properties of everything or nothing (*à la* Speaks), complex existentially quantified facts concerning semantic values and assignment functions (*à la* King), and so on – everyone should agree that the following is true:

The propositional content of M1 = the propositional content of M2 iff M1 and M2 represent the same objects, properties, and relations in the same way.

(where M1 and M2 range over possible mental state tokens). We then try to show that though this principle is platitudinous, the R-hand side of this principle is plausibly more fundamental than the left. For example, anyone with physicalist sympathies will agree that it must be possible to make sense of how a mental state represents as it does without making any essential appeal to propositions (via, say, casual covariation, or a biological function of indicating). We then argue that if you've agreed to this much, the theory of propositions is done; the entities generated from this principle do all the work we might have ever hoped for propositions to do (officially, we limit our claim to the explanatory need for propositions in the philosophy of mind, but we are both attracted to a more sweeping claim than just that). Propositions, on this view, are objects whose natures are exhausted by the fact that they are generated as abstractions from the independently explicable facts about our linguistic and mental representations.

If Quine's worries about synonymy can be substantiated, that would be enough to sink any proposal along the foregoing lines. But, like many others, I've never been fully convinced by Quine's arguments on this front. As Boghossian (1996), and others have argued, skepticism about synonymy quickly leads to a more general nihilism about meaning altogether; if it makes any sense to speak of the content of a sentence or a mental state, then it must also make sense to talk of "having the same content". Whereas Quine might have been willing to embrace meaning nihilism and deny the former, I'm not. Quine's famous discussions of indeterminacy and translation are hugely important, but those arguments don't suffice to show that there is no relation of strict synonymy, or that that notion isn't transitive (and, hence, not an equivalence relation). Rather, Quine's arguments help show (i) the fact that our considered theories about what means what are plausibly underdetermined by the data on which those judgements are based and (ii) that helpful translation manuals need not always preserve strict synonymy; rather, translation is a sometimes a messy affair, guided by practical considerations of simplicity and ease of use.

That said, we should allow for the possibility of cases in which it is *vague* whether the synonymy-relation obtains (not, *à la* Quine) that there is no such relation at all. Figuring out how to square vagueness with the abstractionist methodology will require some fancy footwork, but I'm not sure that it presents any insurmountable difficulties. Some such complication seems independently needed for other abstracta that we are happy to admit into our ontology. Consider *weights*. It is plausible that the weight of x = the weight of y just in case x and y are equi-weighted, where this equivalence relation can be independently explicated in terms of the behavior of objects when placed in a pan balance.⁴ Plausibly, this principle tells you all you need to know to *everything* there is to know about weights-qua-abstract objects. We are happy to accept weights into our ontology for

⁴ See Shapiro (2014).

this reason, despite the fact that we are aware of the vagueness in the relation from which we abstract. In most practical settings this vagueness simply doesn't seem to get in our way; we effectively ignore it. Perhaps, we could supervaluate over the relevant relations (having-the-same-content-as and being equi-weighted) to generate our corresponding strict, well-defined notions of weight and content. If we proceed in this way, it may turn out that a more flexible, context-sensitive notion of 'relative *similarity* of content' will be explanatorily important than that of 'strict content equivalence'.⁵

I understand having reservations about the abstractionist proposal for reasons having to do with skepticism about meaning properties and relations. But that's not what is animating Stalnaker. The issue that concerns him, rather, is that propositions must be "explained and justified" prior to and independently of the linguistic and mental representations that have them as their contents. But just why this must be so is never made clear. We are not, for example, tempted to think that the ontology of birthdays must be given and justified independently of the facts that we appeal to those abstracta to help us keep track of (e.g., that Ramsey and Schopenhauer were born of the same calendar day). Why should propositions be different in this regard? If this is a silly question, then an answer should be immediately forthcoming. Perhaps there *is* something distinctive about the particular explanatory role that propositions play for us that would require us to provide such an independent account. But Stalnaker's otherwise excellent study leaves this fundamental question hanging.⁶

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⁵ See Field (2017).

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