"Review of Peter Hanks's *Propositional Content*"
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In the 20th century, philosophers were either skeptical of propositions altogether, tried to replace them by sets of worlds, or seemed content with Platonist views on which propositions represent or have their truth-conditions independently of minds and languages.

In the 21st century, things are radically different. In vogue are Naturalist views on which we first explain what it is for us qua mental or linguistic creatures to represent, and then explain on that basis what it is for propositions to represent or have their truth-conditions. Peter Hanks is such a Naturalist and his excellent *Propositional Content* is the culmination of over 15 years of thinking about how to best develop such a view and what it can do for us.

The book can be divided into two parts followed by a standalone final chapter. The first part is made up of chapters 1-4 which criticize other views and set out Hanks's own view. Chapter 1 sketches the Platonist view, Hanks's *Act-Based* view, and Scott Soames's similar view, and argues that the latter is incoherent (more on this below). Chapter 2 poses the question of what it is for propositions to represent or have their truth-conditions and criticizes primitivist refusals to explain this, Frege's and Russell's attempts, and Jeff King's "interpretivist" view. Chapters 3 and 4 set out Hanks's view in more depth.

The second part is made up of chapters 5-8 which put the view to work to solve Frege's Puzzle and problems posed by empty names, and to provide accounts of attitude reports and the *de se*. The standalone final chapter hints at how the approach to propositional content can be extended to interrogative and imperatival contents.

In this review I'll focus on the core of Hanks's *Act-Based* view and some of its features that forge interesting connections with other questions about mind and language.

Here's a simplified sketch. On the first step he tells us what it is for us to represent. In the simplest cases, we represent by *referring* to objects, *indicating* properties, and *predicating*

the properties of objects. For example, to represent Sanders as being electable is to refer to Sanders, indicate the property of being electable, and predicate the property of him. This amounts to judging* that Sanders is electable.[1] We can represent this as follows (where REF(*Sanders*) stands for referring to Sanders via his name, IND(*electable*) stands for indicating the property of being electable, and '├' stands for predication):

(1) ├ <REF(*Sanders*), IND(*electable*)>

More complicated cases involving relations, quantification, negation etc. can be handled along similar lines with the help of some extra machinery.

On the second step Hanks then tells us what propositions are such that they represent. Our token acts of predication and our judgments* represent and are true or false in the primary sense (let's mark this with representation$_1$, true$_1$ and so on). When we predicate the property of *being electable* of Sanders we and our judgment* represent him truly$_1$ when he is electable, falsely$_1$ when he's not. Propositions are judgment*-types. The proposition that Sanders is electable represents and is true or false in a derivative sense (let's mark this with representation$_2$ and so on); namely, the proposition/judgment*-type represents$_2$ Sanders as being electable in that to perform a token of it is to represent$_1$ Sanders as being electable.

This simplified sketch of Hanks's view makes it virtually indistinguishable from Soames's very similar view which also appeals to predication and gives the same two-step explanation of what propositions are such that they represent (Soames 2014). However, there are several substantive differences, of which I will discuss two.

Predication and Force. Hanks thinks that predication is *forceful* in that when you predicate being electable of Sanders, you take a stand on whether he is electable. This is why

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[1] I use 'judge*' because Hanks's thinks that the basic propositional act is defined in terms of taking a stand on whether the object has the property. In contrast, the ordinary notion of judging has intuitively more packed in it than just taking such a stand. For example, it is common to think that to judge that p is the case one has to have considered the question whether p is the case and taken a reflective stand in the light of one's evidence. Here's another way to put it. When one guesses that p, one judges* that p, but doesn't judge that p. Here's a further way. When you judge* you exhibit being a *representational* agent, but not necessarily yet an *epistemic* one. However, when you judge you do exhibit being an *epistemic* agent.

predication results in a judgment* and propositions are judgment*-types. In contrast, Soames thinks that predication is *neutral* and doesn't involve taking a stand. This is why predication results in an act of entertaining and propositions are entertaining-types. Hanks argues that Soames's view is incoherent because it can't be that token acts of predication represent$_1$ things as being a certain way, truly or falsely, while at the same time not involving taking a stand on how things are (36-41). I think that he is right about this and that his view of predication is therefore preferable to Soames's.[2]

Existence of Propositions. Hanks thinks that it's not necessary for the existence of propositions qua judgment*-types that they have been tokened (27). However, he also thinks that we don't create propositions and that they're mind-independent (21, 27). Thus, he seems to think that there were propositions/judgment*-types even before there were acts of predication. In contrast, Soames thinks that it's necessary for the existence of a proposition that at least each of the component acts has been tokened (Soames 2014, 102). It follows that there couldn't have been propositions before there were acts of predication.

Hanks's residual Platonism makes his view inconsistent. Start from the claim that it's our token acts of predication that represent$_1$ and ground propositions and their representation$_2$. Now, consider a world where there have never been any acts of predication. This is a world without representation$_1$. However, if representation$_1$ really grounds propositions and their representation$_2$ then this is also a world without propositions. Thus, it can't be that there were propositions/judgment*-types before there were any acts of predication. I therefore think that something along the lines of Soames's view of the existence of propositions is preferable to Hanks's.

Let me next illustrate two further features of Hanks's approach that forge interesting connections with other questions about mind and language.

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[2] Taking predication to be forceful raises the specter of the Frege-Geach problem. On Hanks's view prima facie to judge* that it is not the case that Sanders is electable would be to:

⊢ < ⊢ <REF(*Sanders*), IND(*electable*)>, IND (*Not-True*)>

But it's simply false that judging* that it is not the case that Sanders is electable involves judging that he is. For reasons of space I won't be able to discuss how Hanks's tries to solve this with the help of his notions of cancellation and target-shifting. I argue elsewhere that the solution doesn't work and that his notion of target-shifting pushes him towards a different view (Reiland 2013, 2019).

Properties as Rules. Naturalist views are motivated by the problem of explaining what it is for propositions to have truth-conditions. Robert Stalnaker once challenged Hanks in a Q&A session by saying that if one is worried about this, them one should equally be worried about what it is for properties to have satisfaction-conditions. Stalnaker's implication was that we shouldn't be worried about either and should take both as primitive (46-47fn, for explicit defense of this implication see Pautz 2016). King and Soames have both suggested that even though we should be worried about propositions, we shouldn't be worried about properties. Hanks is to be commended for seeing that it would be inconsistent for a Naturalist to take properties to be Platonic abstract objects that have their satisfaction-conditions independently of minds and languages. Rather, as Hanks puts it, to indicate a property is to give yourself a rule or principle for sorting (23fn, 206-207). This raises the question what is it for us to give ourselves such rules and shows how questions about propositional content relate to questions about concept possession and rule-following.

Language First. Hanks is drawn to a Wittgensteinian or Sellarsian language-first perspective on which spoken language is more fundamental than conceptual thought. For example, he claims that judgments* lack determinate propositional content absent linguistic articulation (or dispositions for such articulation) (208-210). He thinks that it follows that behavioral and mental predication should be understood in terms of linguistic predication (207-208). Another thing that plausibly follows is that indicating a determinate property, giving yourself a determinate rule, is to be understood in terms of the use of general terms and verbs. One way in which this comes out is in his discussion of wasps that can be trained to detect land mines based on the smell of TNT (65-66). He first says that when a wasp flies to something that smells like TNT it behaviorally predicates the property of smelling like TNT of that thing. However, he then immediately claims that since the wasp lacks a language, its judgment doesn't have a determinate content at all. (One might wonder here what allows Hanks to claim that non-linguistic creatures like wasps indicate properties and predicate at all).

Adopting the language-first perspective means that Hanks can't explain linguistic meaning on the basis of conceptual thought in the standard Gricean, Searlean, or Lewisian

fashion. This raises the question of whether and how this can be done and shows how questions about propositional content relate to questions about the relationship between language and thought and the prospects for a non-mentalist view of meaning.

To conclude, I think that Hanks's view is one of the most plausible Naturalist views of representation and propositional content on offer and *Propositional Content* is therefore essential reading for anyone interested in its topic. However, its value lies further in the fact that it helps us clearly see how questions about propositional content discussed by philosophers like Frege, Russell, Kaplan, Perry, Lewis, Stalnaker, Soames, and King are related to questions about concept possession, rule-following, the relationship between language and thought, and prospects for a non-mentalist view of meaning discussed by philosophers like Wittgenstein, Sellars, McDowell, Peacocke, Wright, Brandom, and Gauker. I therefore highly recommend it to anyone interested in meaning and intentionality in general.[3]

References

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