

8. Representational entities and representational acts

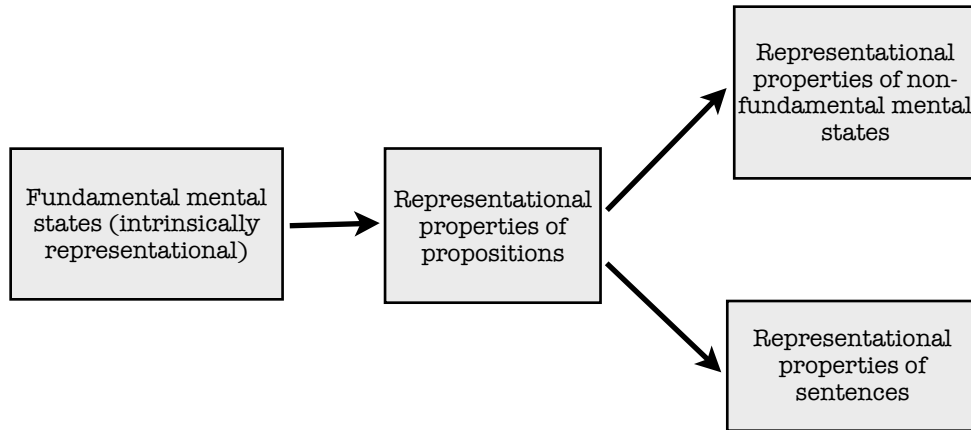
Jeff Speaks

Here's one thing that the three of us have in common: we all dislike the idea that propositions could be entities which are intrinsically representational — in the sense that they both are representational, and would exist and be representational even if there were no subjects around to do any representing.

My response to this negative claim is pretty straightforward: I deny that propositions are representational entities, and instead identify the proposition expressed by “Amelia talks” with the property of being such that Amelia talks. This property is not — any more than any other property — a representational entity; properties are not about anything. I then argue that we can use properties of this sort to give an account of the sorts of phenomena for which we might have thought we needed representational entities: the representational mental states of subjects, and the fact that sentences, like the contents of these states, have truth conditions.

King and Soames both give a different kind of responses to the denial that there are intrinsically representational entities. They think that, even if there are no intrinsically representational entities (in the above sense), we still need representational entities. It's just that we need to explain how these entities come to have representational properties; and each tries to explain this by saying how the relevant entities come to have the representational properties they do in terms of the mental acts (broadly construed) of thinking subjects.

King's and Soames' theories differ in many important ways; in particular they differ on the question of which mental acts provide the relevant representational properties. (In King's case, these are interpretations of sentential and propositional relations, and in Soames', they are events of predication.) But they both satisfy the very abstract sketch of the preceding paragraph, and hence both are theories which fill in the following diagram in different ways:



Below I'll turn to the details of King's and Soames' theories. But the fact that they share the above structure is enough to raise two general questions about their views.

The first is a question of motivation. Given that both King and Soames want to supply propositions with representational properties, there's a pretty clear sense in which both theories say more than mine. But, once we have intrinsically representational propositions off the table, why should we try to come up with derivatively representational surrogates?

This question can be brought into sharper focus by pointing out the ways in which King and Soames accept the basic ontology of the theory I (adapting the views of Chisholm, Lewis, van Inwagen, and others) provide. Neither King nor Soames expresses any skepticism about properties; on the contrary, each makes free use of properties in his account of propositions. (Each, like me, thinks of properties as among the constituents of propositions.¹) Neither King nor Soames expresses any skepticism about our ability to have cognitive access to properties; again, each presupposes this sort of access in giving his account of propositions.² So it seems that each should agree that the properties with which I identify propositions exist, and that they are the sorts of things to which we have cognitive access.

This last point bears emphasis. Both King and Soames emphasize, in different ways, the naturalistic credentials of their theories. King thinks of his account as one of naturalized propositions because it avoids saying that entities are representational independently of thinking subjects — still more naturalistic, then, is a theory which avoids saying that any entities are representational, full stop. Both King and Soames wonder how our cognitive access to propositions as traditionally conceived might be understood, and take pains to explain how we might have access to the entities with which they identify propositions. But in giving this account, both presuppose rather than explain our cognitive access to properties — hence it's hard to see how it could be easier

¹ Though see [cite Part IV essay] for some remarks on the meaning of 'constituent' in the context of each of our theories.

² cite

to have cognitive access to the entities with which they identify propositions than to the properties which I take propositions to be. It may well be that our cognitive access to properties is something which needs explanation; but, if so, this is a challenge for my theory no more than for those of Soames and King.

I suggest, then, that the ontology of the theory I prefer is a proper subset of the ontologies of the theories of King and Soames, and our cognitive access to the entities with which I identify propositions can be no harder to understand than our cognitive access to propositions as conceived by King and Soames. It then seems to me that if we are to prefer their theories to the property theory, we must think that their theories explain something which my admittedly sparser theory cannot. What I don't quite see is what this crucial explanandum could be.

A second sort of question for theories of the sort that Soames and King provide can be presented by way of a dilemma. If propositions have representational properties, then either they have them essentially, or they don't. But there is trouble either way.

If propositions have their representational properties essentially, then it is hard to see how any theory could explain *why* they have those properties. This is just because there seem to be limits on the sort of explanation we can give of why something has a property, if it has that property essentially.

Suppose that my desk — call it 'Fred' — is essentially wooden. Given this, can we explain why Fred is wooden? One might well think that we can't. Or, at least, we can't explain this in the same way that we can explain why a book is sitting on a particular table — after all, Fred simply couldn't exist without being wooden, and so we can't recount events in the history of Fred's existence which led to its woodenness.

That said, there is, of course, another sense in which we *can* explain how Fred came to be wooden — and that is just that we can explain how Fred came to be. But, given that Fred could not exist without being wooden, this is the only sort of explanation of Fred's woodenness which we can give.

Hence, on the view that propositions have their representational properties essentially, it seems that the only explanation we can give of their possession of those properties is an explanation of how the relevant proposition came to be. But one might think that giving an explanation of why a proposition exists is not the same thing as giving an explanation of its possession of certain representational properties. This is best brought out by thinking about an example.

Consider a proponent of propositions as traditionally conceived: someone who thinks that propositions have their representational properties independently of anything that anyone thinks or does. Such a person could, it seems, think of propositions as structured; and he could also think that some propositions — singular propositions — have contingently existing objects as constituents. Reflecting on these commitments, our traditional proposition theorist might also come to believe that singular propositions can't exist unless their constituents do. So far, it seems, none of these commitments force our imaginary theorist — who of course has a lot in common with many actual philosophers — to give up her traditional view of propositions, according to which "propositions have truth conditions by their very natures and independently of minds and languages" (p.

XX) and “propositional representation is primary and the agent’s representation is to be explained in terms of it” (p. XX)

But now consider a singular proposition about some artefact — say, the paper airplane I just made. How should our traditional proposition theorist think about this proposition? Given the commitments just sketched, she should say that by making the paper airplane I brought into existence a bunch of singular propositions with that airplane as a constituent — including, for example, the proposition that that paper airplane is white.

Now: should our traditional proposition theorist say that her construction of the airplane explains the representational properties of the proposition that that airplane is white? It seems to me that she should not. She should say that her construction of the airplane explains the existence of that singular proposition, but that once it came to exist, it brought its representational properties with it; it had those properties, as it were, automatically. Nothing in the making of the airplane explained the proposition’s having those representational properties, and hence nothing in this story should force our traditional proposition theorist to stop being a traditional proposition theorist.

This example can be used to formulate a challenge to those who want to explain the representational properties of propositions and who take the first horn of our dilemma, and say that propositions have their representational properties essentially. Let E be something proposed as the explanation for the representational properties of the proposition that that airplane is white. We should agree that my making the paper airplane does not explain the representational properties of this proposition. Hence we should agree that if E is to provide a genuine explanation of this proposition’s representational properties, it must bear some relation to that proposition’s having its representational properties which my act of making the paper airplane does not. (So it can’t *just* be the relation of bringing that proposition into existence.) The challenge is to say what this relation could be.

If one thinks that it’s hard to see what this relation could be, this might push us toward the second horn of the dilemma, according to which propositions don’t have their representational properties essentially. This view fits much more easily with the idea that we can explain the representational properties of propositions: if they don’t have those properties essentially, then it is no harder, in principle, to understand how we could imbue them with these properties than it is to explain how we could paint a fence white. But this view faces other problems.

If propositions don’t have their representational properties essentially, then it is possible for some proposition to exist, and either lack representational properties altogether, or to have different representational properties than it actually has. But (if propositions have representational properties) there is a presumably a necessary connection between a proposition’s representational properties and its truth conditions. Hence if the proposition that grass is green does not have its representational properties essentially, it could presumably exist without being true iff grass is green. But this leads to very odd results; in particular, it seems to make claims like the following true:

Possibly, John believes that grass is green, and grass is green, but John's belief is not true.

Possibly, grass is green, and the proposition that grass is green is false (or exists and lacks a truth-value).

This seems unacceptable.³

Both Soames and King opt for the first horn of the dilemma: both think that we can explain the representational properties of propositions despite the fact that propositions have those properties essentially. The discussion of this horn of the dilemma above gives us an initial reason to doubt that such explanations can succeed. In what follows, I'll defend this claim, by turning to the specifics of the explanations which King's and Soames' theories provide.

KING'S EXPLANATION OF THE REPRESENTATIONAL PROPERTIES OF PROPOSITIONS

On King's theory, propositions are facts. To follow his example, let's consider the proposition that Michael swims, which he names FAST. This fact includes Michael, the property of swimming, and the *propositional relation* corresponding to the open sentence

[PR] there is a context c such that \underline{x} is the semantic value (relative to c and assignment g) of a lexical item e of some language L and \underline{y} is the semantic value (relative to c and assignment g) of a lexical item e' of L such that e occurs at the left terminal node of the sentential relation R that in L encodes ascription and e' occurs at R 's right terminal node.⁴

A first pass at King's view then identifies the proposition that Michael swims with the fact obtained by assigning Michael as value to the free variable 'x', and the property of swimming as value to the free variable 'y'. As noted above, King denies that propositions like this have representational properties on their own; rather, we do something to give them these representational properties. So what is it that we do?

An initial thought is that it is our interpretation of the sentential relation R as encoding ascription. But this can't be the whole story, since this seems like an explanation of how "Michael swims" comes to express FAST rather than an explanation of why FAST has the representational properties that it does. This, I think, is why King

³ One point worth noting here: above I'm using 'essential property' as equivalent to 'property a thing has necessarily.' But it is plausible, following Fine (1994), that we can understand the essential properties of a thing as a proper subset of the properties that it has necessarily; and perhaps we can explain why a thing necessarily possesses certain properties in terms of its essential properties. Given all of this, one might try to escape the dilemma above by saying that propositions have their representational properties necessarily but not essentially, and that the essential properties of propositions can explain their representational properties. This seems to me like a promising general strategy; but I'm not quite sure how to make it work in the context of Soames' or King's theory. Thanks to Ben Caplan for helpful discussion of this point.

⁴ As King notes, we might think of propositional relations as either involving specific sentential relations, or as involving existential generalization over sentential relations. [cite] I prefer the second version of the theory, which is what I use in what follows — but nothing hangs on this choice here.

suggests that speakers not only interpret sentential relations like concatenation as encoding ascription, but also interpret propositional relations like [PR] as encoding ascription; and it is this last fact which explains the representational properties of FAST. As King puts it, “FAST has truth conditions because speakers interpret its propositional relation as ascribing the property of swimming to Michael.”

How do speakers interpret propositional relations? King’s answer is that they do so by interpreting sentential relations like concatenation. As King says,

“Speakers work their way up the propositional relation composing semantic values in the way they do, thus interpreting the propositional relation, because it is the way the semantic significance of the syntax dictates that they compose these semantic values. In this way, the explanation of why speakers interpret the propositional relation the way they do appeals to how they interpret sentential relations.” (p. XX)

And the interpretation of sentential relations, in turn, is a matter (at least for simple sentences like “Michael swims”) of the attitudes those speakers take to the truth-value of the relevant sentence:

“That English speakers interpret R as ascribing the semantic value of ‘swims’ to the semantic value of ‘Michael’ consists in the fact that they spontaneously and unreflectively take [the sentence “Michael swims”] to be true iff Michael possesses the property of swimming.” (p. XX)

Here we’ve reached the “fundamental mental states” mentioned above: they are a matter of speakers spontaneously taking the relevant sentences to be true iff certain conditions are satisfied, thus interpreting the relevant sentential relations, and making it possible for speakers to also go on to interpret propositional relations like [PR].

This can make it sound like the acts of interpreting sentential and propositional relations are like opening a door and walking through it — you have to do the first to do the second, but they’re still wholly distinct types of action. But this is not quite right. This is because it seems that a speaker’s interpreting a sentential relation R as encoding ascription must be metaphysically sufficient for his also interpreting [PR] as encoding ascription. For suppose that it were not. Then a speaker could interpret the syntactic relation in “Michael swims” as encoding ascription — thereby ensuring that there is some language in which a term for Michael is concatenated with a term for swimming, and in which concatenation encodes ascription — without the proposition that Michael swims

existing. (Since this proposition, on King’s theory, could not exist unless [PR] encodes ascription.) But this would be absurd.⁵

In what follows, I want to discuss three sorts of worries about this theory: (1) that propositional relations necessarily have certain representational properties, so their possession of these properties can’t be explained by what speakers do; (2) that the best understanding of the nature of interpreting sentential relations leads to circularity; and (3) that there’s an obstacle to generalizing King’s theory to provide an account of the contents of perceptual states.

1. Consider the claim that

[PR] encodes ascription.

Let’s suppose that this is true. Is it a necessary truth, or a contingent one?

[PR] is a “pure” relation, whose constituents include no contingently existing concrete objects, and hence it presumably exists necessarily. So for the above claim to be contingent, there must be some world at which either (i) [PR] exists and encodes something other than ascription, or (ii) [PR] exists and encodes nothing at all.

We can rule out (i). If (i) were true, then speakers would presumably have to interpret [PR] as encoding something other than ascription, and their doing so would involve the interpretation of some sentential relation R. If they interpreted R as encoding ascription, they would also (by the argument above) so interpret [PR]. And if they interpreted R as encoding something other than ascription, then they would be interpreting some propositional relation other than [PR], since the latter is defined partly in terms of sentential relations which encode ascription.

(ii) is less easily ruled out. So let’s leave it open. We can still conclude that the following is a necessary truth:

If [PR] encodes anything, then it encodes ascription.

⁵ This point is also relevant to a distinction between two different ways in which King sometimes states his theory. King sometimes suggests that the facts with which he identifies propositions include this fact about how the relevant propositional relations are interpreted. [cite king part ii essay p. 9, also ‘questions of unity’ p. 265] This suggests that FAST is not the fact

(a) [PR](Michael, swimming)

but rather the more complex fact

(b) [PR](Michael, swimming) & [PR] encodes ascription

In what follows, I’ll ignore this complication in King’s view, and discuss the simpler version (a) of the theory. I don’t think that, in the end, the difference between these versions of the view matters much. This is because, given the way that King defines the relevant notions, it is impossible for (a) to obtain without (b), or for (b) to obtain without (a). The second direction is trivial; the first holds because, by the argument just given, interpreting the relevant sentential relation as encoding ascription must be metaphysically sufficient for also encoding the propositional relation involving that sentential relation. But then since [PR] could not hold between Michael and swimming unless R was interpreted as encoding ascription, it follows that, necessarily, if (a) is a fact, then (b) is as well.

Hence it is also a necessary truth that

If [PR] relates anything, then the fact that it relates them is true iff the first instantiates the second.

So propositional relations are necessarily existing entities which necessarily have representational properties — like the property of being such that for any x and y , the fact that they relate x and y is true iff the first instantiates the second, and is about x and is about y . Because these are necessary truths, they are not under the control of speakers, and speakers do not bring them about. But at this stage, one might worry that propositional relations are the sorts of things whose existence King is concerned to deny — entities which have their representational properties “by [their] very nature and independently of minds and languages.”


King might reasonably, and correctly, reply that on his account there are no propositions, and there is no truth and falsity, without speakers doing something to bring it about that there is. I’m a bit skeptical that this reply is enough to allay the worry that propositional relations are a bit too much like the primitively representational propositions King wants to do without. One way to bring out the reasons for this is to focus on just what speakers do to bring truth and falsity into the world.

The role played by speakers is simply to make it that case that [PR] relates some things; once they have brought into existence a fact of the form [PR](x,y) there’s no further work for them to do in giving this fact its representational properties. But, given this, it seems like the role played by speakers on this theory is uncomfortably close to the played by our paper airplane maker in the example discussed above.

We can focus this worry in the way mentioned above, by asking: what relation does the interpretation of [PR] bear to the representational properties of FAST which the making of the paper airplane does not bear to the proposition that that paper airplane is white? It seems to me that this is a difficult question for King’s view to answer; and this, in turn, suggests that we are getting no more of an explanation of the representational properties of propositions than is provided by the making of the paper airplane.

King might reply that the crucial difference here is a difference between the relevant action types — making a paper airplane, on the one hand, and interpreting a propositional relation, on the other. Making a paper airplane, he might object, simply isn’t the sort of action which can explain the representational properties of the many singular propositions involving the airplane — interpreting a sentential and a propositional relation, however, is.

But this focus on exactly which actions of language-using subjects do the relevant explanatory work leads to another, related sort of worry about King’s view. In order to avoid appeal to merely possible contexts, King allows that it is sufficient for an arbitrary singular proposition that o is swims to exist that there be some syntactic structure

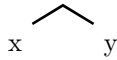
x  swims

in English, where the ‘x’ is a variable which has a semantic value only relative to an assignment. For any object *o*, there will be, after all, *some* assignment which assigns *o* as the value of ‘x.’ But that will be sufficient for [PR] to hold between *o* and the property of swimming, which will be sufficient for the relevant singular proposition to exist.

But this means that the first time someone used a variable expression, it was — metaphysically speaking — a much more momentous event than one might have thought. For this event brought a host of representational entities into the world: the infinitely many singular propositions which predicate swimming of something.

In one sense, this is nice for King’s view: it secures the existence of a great many propositions, and at very little cost. But this virtue has a corresponding vice, and reinforces the worries raised in connection with the example of the paper airplane above. The worry is that we are getting too much for free from the nature of [PR] — to which no thinking subjects contribute anything — to get a satisfying explanation, in terms of thinking subjects, of the representational properties of propositions.

We can push the point one step further. As King notes (note 11), natural languages plausibly contain expressions which are best treated as variables over properties. But then we could presumably have a sentence in a natural language, like “Something is some way” which involves the syntactic structure



where ‘x’ is a variable over objects and ‘y’ a variable over properties. But could uttering “Something is some way” really suffice to explain the representational properties of every singular monadic predication?

2. These have all been worries about the extent to which King’s theory explains rather than assumes the representational properties of propositions. Let’s turn our focus now to the nature of the fundamental mental state which is supposed to be doing the explaining: speakers’ interpretation of sentential relations.

An initial worry is how we are to understand these interpretive states of speakers. On pain of regress, we can’t understand them as propositional attitudes: after all, right now we’re in the business of explaining how propositions come to be. Hence “unreflectively taking” sentences to be true iff certain conditions are satisfied can’t be a matter of speakers believing them, or intending them, to be true under certain conditions. The worries here go beyond worries about understanding this as a non-proposition-involving mental state; the worries also involve the consistency of this theory with otherwise plausible-seeming views about the foundations of semantics.

Let’s return to the proposition that Michael swims. Let’s simplify by ignoring the remarks above about variables and assignments above, and assume that this proposition came into existence via some speaker’s interpretation of the sentential relation of concatenation in some sentence which contains a term whose semantic value is Michael

and another whose semantic value is the property of swimming. I take it that this basic story is supposed to be true for at least some propositions, even if others first came to be in the context of perceptual experience (about which more below) or other mental states, rather than language use.

This leads to a worry about circularity. It is plausible that we should want to give some explanation of the fact that, e.g., the semantic value of “Michael” is Michael, and that the semantic value of “swims” is the property of swimming. But these facts about the semantic values of expressions are, on King’s view, explanatorily prior to speakers’ interpretations of sentential relations; hence they are also explanatorily prior to the propositions whose existence are explained by those interpretive acts. This places a very strong constraint on our account of the facts in virtue of which expressions like names and predicates come to have the semantic values that they do: our account won’t be able to make use of propositional attitudes like the beliefs and intentions of language users. But virtually all of the most well worked out theories of the facts in virtue of which expressions have the contents they do make use of propositional attitudes of this sort.

3. This worry leads into the question of how, on King’s view, we should understand the mental states of subjects who existed prior to the existence of natural languages, and hence (one might think, given the above story) prior to the existence of propositions. Do we really want to deny that such subjects had beliefs, desires, and perceptual experiences, each of which plausibly involves a relation to a proposition?

King is well aware of this problem, and tries to make room for the existence of such subjects. In particular, he finds plausible the idea that, prior to the existence of languages like English, organisms enjoyed perceptual experiences which had propositions as their contents. King further suggests that “there will be an account of those contents in the spirit of the present account of the contents of natural language sentences.” I agree with King’s thought that an account of propositions should be consistent with pre-linguistic but genuinely propositional perceptual experiences, but am less sure that I can see how his account meets this constraint.

Let’s consider how we might adapt the preceding story to the case of perceptual experiences; to fix ideas, let’s think about a frog’s visual experience of a fly sitting on a green leaf, and let’s simplify by supposing that the content of this visual experience is a singular proposition which predicates a location (“L”) of the fly. Presumably this, like any such singular proposition, could be expressed by a sentence. Hence, on King’s view, the content of the frog’s experience will then be the proposition expressed by such a sentence, i.e. the fact that the fly and L stand in the propositional relation [PR]. Our question is: what did the frog do to bring this proposition into existence?

I take it that the frog must have done something to interpret the propositional relation [PR]. But this seems to show that we need to change our view of what the relevant propositional relation is — after all, the frog isn’t interpreting any sentential relations. And it won’t do to say that [PR] works fine for the propositions expressed by sentences but that we need to invoke some other propositional relation for mental states,

since it is quite plausible that some propositions can both be expressed by a sentence and be the content of a mental state, like a perceptual experience.

I think that the best thing for King to say here is that even if the frog does not interpret any sentential relations, he does do something similar: he interprets his experience. This suggests that we should then revise our view of propositional relations like [PR] so that they will be as applicable to the case of interpretations of experiences as to the case of interpretations of sentences.

This is obviously non-trivial. But let's suppose that we've done it. A problem still remains, which has to do with a fundamental difference between sentences and perceptual experiences. Presumably, the phenomenal character of the frog's experience is fixed independently of the frog's interpretation of his experience; were it not, it's hard to see what the frog could be interpreting. But according to a plausible intentionalist thesis, phenomenal properties are identical to certain representational properties, which involve relations to propositions. Hence it seems that if the phenomenal character of the frog's experience is fixed independently of his interpretation of his experience, the content of his experience must be as well.

But if this is right, and the analogue of interpretation of sentential relations plays no role here, we lose our explanation of how the fly and L come to stand in whatever the relevant propositional relation turns out to be. And then we lose our explanation of the existence of the relevant proposition, as well as of its representational properties.

To be sure, King does not pretend to a fully worked out theory of the contents of perceptual experience, and it may be that his story can be told in some way other than the way I've just argued to be objectionable.⁶ But I do think that the disanalogies between perceptual experiences and sentences cast some doubt on the idea that King's theory can be smoothly generalized — as it surely must be, if it is to be acceptable — to the case of perceptual experience.

SOAMES' EXPLANATION OF THE REPRESENTATIONAL PROPERTIES OF PROPOSITIONS

For Soames, the fundamental mental states are not interpretations of sentential relations but rather token mental events of predication. What are these, and how do they explain the representational properties of propositions? Here's the way Soames introduces the notion:

“Think again about the proposition that o is red. It is the content of an occurrent perceptual or cognitive state whenever the agent predicates *being*

⁶ One idea would be to say that the frog interprets his own brain state rather than the phenomenal character of the experience, and that the connection between that brain state and its content is contingent rather than necessary. Maybe something like this would work, but there are at least two worries. One is the sheer implausibility of the idea that frogs interpret their own brain states in the way that we interpret sentences. The second and more fundamental is that, even if the connection between the underlying brain state and its content is contingent, this does not imply that it is mediated by the interpretation of the frog. More plausibly, it is fixed by facts about (counterfactual and actual) causal relations in which that brain states stands, which are fixed independently of the frog's interpretation.

red of *o*. Whenever an agent does this, a concrete event occurs, at a specific time and place, in which the agent predicates this property of that object. This suggests that the proposition that *o* is red is simply the minimal event type in which an arbitrary agent predicates *being red* of *o*.” (p. XX)

Consider the token event of an agent judging that *o* is red. The idea is that token events of this sort are always underwritten by distinct token events of predicating redness of *o*. And what’s true of judgement also holds for a wide variety of mental events — including entertaining the proposition that *o* is red, accepting that *o* is red, asserting that *o* is red, denying that *o* is red, judging that *o* is red, and visually representing *o* as red. Each token of these event types is accompanied by a distinct token event of predicating redness of *o*.

The primitive representational facts are facts about the representational properties of these token mental events of predication. Propositions are types of such events, and inherit their representational properties from the representational properties of their tokens.

I’d like to raise four sorts of questions about this account: (1) questions about whether we have reason to believe that the relevant token events exist; (2) questions about their frequency; (3) questions about how, if they have these properties necessarily, these representational properties of propositions could be explained by anything we do; and (4) questions about why, given that types don’t invariably inherit the properties of their tokens, propositions should inherit the representational properties of theirs.

1. On reading Soames’ description of the fundamental events of predication, one might be tempted to reply Hume-style, that “when I enter most intimately into what I call my mental states, I always stumble on some particular propositional attitude or other, a judgement or an assertion or an experience. I never can catch an event of predication, and never can observe any thing but the attitudes.” When I think about various propositional attitudes — events of visually representing that *o* is red, judging that *o* is red, and asserting that *o* is red — I really don’t notice an event of predication which accompanies each one. But if they are always accompanied by such an event, what explains this?

One might reply that I do notice the event of predication — it’s just that I don’t notice it as such. After all, I do notice the similarity in content between these different mental states — and isn’t this, on his view, just to notice the events of predication? Not quite: noticing sameness of content, on Soames’ view, is noticing sameness in associated event types (contents being identical to event types). But to see that various mental states are all relations to the same event type is not to notice the occurrence of tokens of that type.

A different and more promising reply is suggested by some remarks Soames makes when explaining predication: he might say that every occurrent propositional attitude is accompanied by a certain basic propositional attitude: roughly, the attitude of “calling the proposition to mind.” Soames calls this attitude *entertaining*. Perhaps we could simply identify the event of coming to have this propositional attitude — entertaining the proposition that *o* is red — with the token event of predicating redness of *o*. Soames says

things which suggest this; for instance, he says that “to entertain the proposition that *o* is red is to *predicate* redness of *o*.”⁷ If such an identity claim were true, this would make the existence of the token events of predication much less dubious — for, in each of the cases discussed above, we obviously do call the relevant proposition to mind.

But it is hard for me to see how this identity claim could be true. For suppose that token events of predication were identical to token events of a subject coming to entertain a proposition. Then, on Soames’ view, a certain token event *e* would be identical to a token event *e** of a subject coming to stand in a relation to an event type *E* of which *e* is a token. But if token events *x*, *y* are identical, then any type of which *x* is a token must also be a type of which *y* is a token. But one type of which *e* is a token is the proposition that *o* is red. It then follows that *e** must be a token of the proposition that *o* is red. But then propositions are event types with the surprising property that each of its token events is some subject coming to stand in a relation to that type.

This is worrying for a few reasons. First, it leads to troubles understanding what the view says. Soames claims that the proposition that *o* is red is a certain event type *E*. If we want to know what *E* is, we naturally look to its tokens. But when we look to its tokens, we find that they are events of subjects coming to bear a certain relation to *E* — which leaves our question about the nature of *E* unanswered.

This regress is not obviously vicious. But it does, I think, make trouble for some of the explanatory claims that Soames seems inclined to make. Soames is inclined to say that the representational properties of propositions are explained by the representational properties of token events of predication, and is at least open to the idea that the existence of the relevant propositions is also explained by the existence of the relevant token events of predication. But it is hard to see how this is going to work if the token events of predication are identical to events of subjects coming to stand in relations to the propositions whose existence and representational properties the token acts of predication were supposed to explain.

A further, related worry comes from reflection on the propositional attitude of entertaining a proposition, on the supposition that events of coming to stand in this attitude are identical to events of predicating properties of objects. These events of predicating properties of objects are supposed to have their representational properties intrinsically — in particular, on pain of circularity, they are not supposed to have their representational properties explained in terms of the representational properties of any proposition. But since these events of predication are identical to events of coming to be in a certain propositional attitude state — entertaining the relevant proposition — it follows that at least one propositional attitude state also must have its representational properties intrinsically, and to be such that its representational properties are not explained by the representational properties of any proposition. But this raises a question: if we are willing to say this about one propositional attitude state, why not say this for all of them? Why not — so far as the explanation of the representational properties of mental states are concerned — do away with the primitive acts of predication entirely, and let each of the familiar propositional attitudes — belief, assertion, etc. — be

⁷ p. 7. See also Soames (2010), 81-2.

intrinsically representational states, whose status as representational is not explained by the representational properties of the propositions to which they are relations?⁸

Now, nothing in his theory forces Soames to identify predicating redness of *o* with entertaining the proposition that *o* is red; his statements to the effect that coming to be in the second state just is a matter of coming to be in the first state are also consistent with holding that the two states (and events of coming to be in those states) are distinct, but closely related — perhaps each is metaphysically necessary and sufficient for the other, and the first in some sense explains the second.

But this leads us back to the Hume-style worries sketched above. We're then postulating a primitive mental state type which, of necessity, accompanies all of our occurrent propositional attitudes, but with which we are not acquainted. Our best hope for establishing our familiarity with predication, after all, was to identify it with the propositional attitude of entertaining a proposition.

The basic worry here needn't be put in quite such a Humean way. Even if we're not worried about the fact that we never notice these events of predication, one might legitimately wonder why is it better to posit a primitively representational mental events with which we have no immediate acquaintance than to say that belief, judgement, assertion, et. al., with which we are acquainted, are primitively representational in just the way that Soames thinks that predication is. (For that matter, a traditional proposition theorist might wonder at this point why it is better to posit a primitively representational mental state than to posit primitively representational propositions.)

The problem here is not just that predication is taken as primitive; every theory will, after all, have some primitives. As Soames points out, negation is plausibly a primitive notion; this hardly shows that we don't understand negation.⁹ The problem is that predication is both a type of mental state with which we are not acquainted, *and* taken as primitive. The first fact makes it legitimate to ask for more information about what predication is; the second fact raises the worry that we will not get a satisfactory answer.

2. Let's set aside these questions about the nature of events of predication and instead ask a question about their frequency: do they accompany every event of a subject coming to be in a propositional attitude state, or just some such events? Either way we answer this question, I think, we run into difficulties.

Soames' answer to this question is that events of predication accompany only some such events: events of subjects coming to be in occurrent mental states. And there's a good reason for taking this line. If we said that *believing* that *o* is red requires an event of predicating redness of *o*, this would make events of predication truly mysterious. After all,

⁸ One might say this while still giving the proposition that grass is green a role in determining exactly which representational property one has when one believes that grass is green. This is of course analogous to what Soames says about predication: the objects of the predication — in our example, *o* and redness — are not themselves representational entities, but the objects of a given event of predication obviously play a role in determining the representational properties of that event.

⁹ Soames (2010), 29.

I presumably have plenty of beliefs which I have never actively called to mind; surely I can simply passively believe that Indiana is not a grapefruit without ever having carried out the relevant predications.

Soames suggests, instead, that only occurrent mental states need be accompanied by events of predication. This means that, for example, I can believe that grass is green without ever having predicated greenness of grass, even if this is not possible for judging that grass is green. This seems plausible.

But Soames is also inclined to think that, at least for simple propositions like the proposition that grass is green, propositions do not exist unless there are token events of predication of the right sort — in particular, the proposition that grass is green does not exist in w unless at least one person in w has predicated greenness of something, and at least one person in w has predicated something of grass.

Nothing in the view that propositions are event types requires us to adopt this claim about the existence conditions of event types. But it would be hard to give up this view about the existence conditions of propositions, given Soames' interest in explaining the representational properties of propositions. After all, if event types did exist necessarily, then propositions would exist, and have all of their representational properties, whether or not there were any thinking subjects around to do any representing. And if this were true, it would be hard to see how Soames' theory could live up to the guiding ideas that

“(i) that the perceptual and cognitive activity of agents is the conceptual basis of all representation and (ii) that propositions are representational in virtue of the relations they bear to this representational activity.” (8)

What role could agents play, if all of the propositions existed and had all of their representational properties no matter what they did?¹⁰

The problem is that this pair of commitments — that belief does not require predication, and that existence does require certain facts about predication — invalidates some intuitively valid inferences.

Consider some property which could be such that no one has ever predicated of anything — say, the property of being 726-sided. Can someone in the relevant world still have beliefs involving this property? It seems that they can; in particular it seems that they can believe that no circles are 726-sided without having ever predicated the property of being 726-sided of anything. Now consider the inference:

Jeff believes that no circles are 726-sided.
Scott believes that no circles are 726-sided.

There's something that Jeff and Scott both believe.

This certainly seems to be valid; indeed, it's the sort of trivially valid inference often used to defend the existence of propositions. But on the present theory it comes out invalid —

¹⁰ Though, as noted in [cite note above], one might try to answer this question by, following [cite fine], explaining some sorts of necessary truths in terms of others.

even though Jeff and Scott both bear the belief relation to the proposition that no circles are 726-sided, this proposition need not exist, and hence there is no guarantee that *there is* something that Jeff and Scott both believe.¹¹

To my mind, this consequence of the theory is made more worrying by the fact that superficially quite similar inferences, like

Jeff asserts that no circles are 726-sided.
Scott asserts that no circles are 726-sided.

There's something that Jeff and Scott both assert.

come out valid — after all, assertion, being an occurrent mental state, does require an event of predication, and hence entails the existence of the relevant propositions. The fact that we are forced to treat the “believes” inferences differently than the “asserts” inferences seems to me to be a cost of the view.

3. Setting aside these worries about the validity of certain inferences, there's a more purely metaphysical worry arising from this discussion of belief and predication, which is just that Soames' theory is committed to the claim that subjects can believe propositions which do not exist, and never did. This is a commitment of which Soames is well aware. But it does show that the view that propositions as event types is one which no philosopher committed to serious actualism — the thesis that nothing can have a property or stand in a relation in *w* without existing in *w* — should accept.

But rather than focusing on the plausibility of denying serious actualism, I'd like to focus on its consequences for Soames' explanatory claims. While Soames does not of course think that propositions can have just any property without existing, he does think that they can have quite a few: not just being believed, but also being true or false, and representing the world as being a certain way.¹² But one might think that this reinstates the worry above — which echoes one of the objections to King's view — that the role actually played by thinking subjects on Soames' view is thinner than it might at first seem.

Consider a barren world *w*, with no subjects doing any thinking or talking. As far as I can tell, on Soames' view, every proposition has all of its representational properties in *w*: the proposition that grass is green is, in *w*, about grass and about greenness; in *w*, it represents grass as green; in *w*, it is true iff grass is green. No subjects in *w* are to thank for the proposition having these representational properties, there being no such subjects

¹¹ One might think that there is an interpretation on which this argument is, even on Soames' view, valid: namely one in which we interpret the existential quantification in the conclusion as possibilist. But if we force an actualist interpretation of the quantifier, by changing the conclusion to “there is actually...”, and changing the premises from “asserts” to “actually asserts,” the argument seems no less valid.

¹² See above, pp. XX.

to thank. How can this be squared with Soames' claim that propositions are representational in virtue of the relations that they bear to representational activity?

There are really two problems here. The first is the problem of explaining the fact that the proposition that grass is green has representational properties in the barren world w . The second is about whether the fact that propositions have representational properties in w impugns our explanation of the representational properties of propositions in the actual world.

Let's focus first on what explains the representational properties of the propositions in w . I think that the best thing for Soames to say here is that propositions can have representational properties in a barren world like w because certain counterfactual claims about those propositions are true in w : in particular, the proposition that grass is green is about grass in w because it is true in w that were some subject to, for example, judge that grass is green, that judgment would involve predicating greenness of grass.

But here it seems to me that we risk reversing Soames' preferred order of explanation. Setting aside worries about the existence of acts of predication, I don't doubt that this counterfactual is true in w . What I wonder is what makes it true. It seems to me that something about w must explain the truth of this counterfactual — but it's hard (in the absence of any actual predications of the right sort) to see what could explain its truth other than facts about the representational properties of the proposition that grass is green. But we can't both explain the representational properties of propositions in terms of certain counterfactuals, and explain the truth of those counterfactuals in terms of the representational properties of propositions.

Now return to the second problem, about propositions in the actual world. What role did the activity of *we*, the thinking and talking subjects of the actual world, have to play in explaining the representational properties of propositions? The preceding remarks about w put some constraints on the way in which we answer this question: we can't say that, were it not for our thought and talk, these propositions wouldn't have those representational properties; after all, they have them all in our barren world w . Our contribution is only this: that we brought them into existence. But this seems to me a less significant achievement when we know that they already had all of their representational properties before they came to be.

This cluster of worries is obviously analogous to the the first objection to King raised above. The situation for Soames' view seems to me in one way better and in one way worse than King's theory. Soames' view avoids the problem that saying "Something is some way" brings into existence every singular monadic proposition; and, in this way, he manages to secure a closer, and potentially more explanatory relation, between the fundamental mental states and the propositions whose representational properties they are supposed to explain. But this virtue is connected to a corresponding vice: by making the connection between the fundamental mental states and propositions more demanding, Soames makes it harder for propositions to exist; which in turn makes it more tempting to say that propositions have all of their representational properties whether or not they exist, and no matter what we (actually) do — which casts doubt, from a different angle, on the central explanatory claim.

4. Let's set these questions aside, and grant for purposes of argument that there are token events of predication of the sort Soames describes, that they occur when the theory says they do, and that their having representational properties is explained by the nature of predication rather than by any built-in representational properties of its objects. There are still residual worries about how these acts of predication could explain the representational properties of propositions. Soames explains the relation between the two succinctly:

“This suggests that the proposition that *o* is red is simply the minimal event type in which an arbitrary agent predicates being red of *o*. This event-type is representational because every conceivable instance of it is one in which an agent represents something as being a certain way.” (p. XX)

This seems straightforward: there are event tokens which are inherently representational, and the event types of which these are tokens — the propositions — inherit their representational properties from those token events.

But, as Ben Caplan has pointed out (in private communication), this is not quite as straightforward as it might at first sound. After all, it is not in general true that event types inherit the properties of tokens of that type. A token event of predication has the property of being a token event, whereas the corresponding type does not; a token event of eating dinner must have a certain duration, whereas the type does not. So if types do not in general inherit the properties of their tokens, why should we think, as Soames encourages us to, that the representational properties of token events of predication explain the properties of propositions?

Soames might reply that representational properties are special: perhaps often event types don't inherit the properties of their tokens, but they do when the relevant properties are representational ones. But this is doubly problematic. On the one hand, it seems *ad hoc*: why should representational properties be different in this way? And, on the other hand, it seems false: even if we restrict ourselves to representational properties, event types don't always inherit the representational properties of their tokens.

To see this, consider again a token event of predicating redness of some particular object *o*. Suppose that here Bob performs the predication, and does so while eating an Oreo cookie. This token event is, it seems, an event of the following types:

- (i) the event type of Bob predicating redness of *o* while eating an Oreo.
- (ii) the event type of someone predicating redness of *o* while eating an Oreo.
- (iii) the event type of someone predicating redness of *o*.
- (iv) the event type of someone predicating something of *o*.
- (v) the event type of someone predicating something of something.
- (vi) the event type of someone doing some predicating.
- (vii) the event type of someone doing something.

On Soames' theory, I think, only (iii)-(v) are propositions, and hence inherit representational properties from the token event described above. But we want to know why just these get that privilege: (i), (ii), (vi) and (vii) are, after all, equally event types of which our token event is a token. No appeal to the specialness of representational properties, as opposed to properties like having a certain duration, will answer this question.

As it stands, this is less an objection to the theory than a question to which the theory ultimately owes an answer which, at present, I don't think that it provides. The question is: given that types often do not invariably inherit the properties of their tokens, what explains the fact (if it is a fact) that propositions inherit the representational properties of their tokens? The foregoing examples are enough to show that this is not a question which has a trivial answer, and hence that the token/type relations to which Soames appeals in his theory are not as obviously explanatory as one might have thought.¹³

Fine, Kit. 1994. "Essence and Modality." *Philosophical Perspectives* 8. Philosophical Perspectives: 1–16.

Soames, Scott. 2010. *What Is Meaning?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹³ Thanks to Ben Caplan for very helpful discussion of these issues, and for comments on a previous draft of this paper.