

Merricks vs. the Russellian Orthodoxy

JEFF SPEAKS

University of Notre Dame

The recent explosion of work on propositions has, in large part, emerged from dissatisfaction with two traditional views: first, that propositions are a *sui generis* category of abstract object; and second, that propositions have primitive, inexplicable representational properties. In his argumentatively rich *Propositions*, Trenton Merricks provides a welcome push-back in favor of these traditional views. Merricks takes propositions to have primitive, inexplicable representational properties, and resists the idea that propositions can be understood as sets, facts, acts, etc.

But there is another sense in which Merricks is a counter-revolutionary: he pushes back not just against the contemporary trends just sketched, but also against a set of widely held theses which I'll jointly call 'the Russellian orthodoxy':

- (R1) Propositions are structured.
- (R2) Propositions have logical forms. For example, some propositions are negations of other propositions.
- (R3) Propositions have constituents, which include the objects they are directly about.
- (R4) Propositions cannot exist without their constituents.
- (R5) Some propositions exist only contingently.

There are natural links between these. (R2) and (R3) are naturally understood as unpacking what (R1) means, and (R5) is entailed by (R3–4), plus the claim that some propositions are directly about contingently existing objects.

While I'm not sure I believe all of the Russellian orthodoxy, I find most of it attractive. Merricks rejects all of it. The aim of this paper is to have a look at Merricks' central arguments against (R1–5).

1. Merricks Against Contingently Existing Propositions

Chapter 1 begins by quoting Aristotle's claim in the *Prior Analytics* that, in deductions, some things 'follow of necessity' from others. In order to have a theory-neutral term,

when the conclusion of an argument ‘follows of necessity’ from its premises, I will say that the premises *entail* the conclusion. Merricks argues, not unreasonably, that it is propositions, rather than sentences, which stand in entailment relations.

Merricks glosses the claim that some propositions entail others as the claim that some arguments are ‘modally valid,’ where

An argument is *modally valid* iff necessarily, if its premises are true, then its conclusion is true.

Merricks then attempts to argue from the fairly uncontroversial premise that some arguments are modally valid to the very controversial conclusion that (R5) is false. The argument begins with the following property actualist principle:¹

TRUTH-EXISTENCE Necessarily, if a proposition is true, then it exists.

Given TRUTH-EXISTENCE and the definition of modal validity, it follows, Merricks points out, that

NECESSITY Necessarily, if the premises of a modally valid argument are true, then its conclusion exists.

But, Merricks says, we can then ask *why* NECESSITY is true:

‘I think that [NECESSITY] should have an explanation. Suppose that all the premises and conclusions of modally valid arguments exist necessarily.... Then, necessarily, if a modally valid argument’s premises are true, its conclusion exists. In this way, the necessary existence of all the premises and conclusions of modally valid arguments directly and elegantly explains why the truth of a modally valid arguments premises necessitates the existence of its conclusion.’ (19)

This appears to be a ‘best explanation’ argument. The idea is that the negation of (R5) would entail, and so explain, the truth of NECESSITY; and this gives us reason to believe the negation of (R5).

This seems to me not the strongest argument in the book. It is true that the falsity of (R5) would explain the truth of NECESSITY. But there is another obvious explanation available. As just noted, TRUTH-EXISTENCE, plus the definition of modal validity, trivially entails the truth of NECESSITY. So there is no big mystery about why NECESSITY is true; its truth seems to be sufficiently explained by our property actualist principle and the definition of modal validity.

2. Merricks Against Existentialism

But this is not Merricks’ only argument against (R5). Let ‘Existentialism’ be the conjunction of (R3) and (R4). Merricks gives two main arguments against Existentialism, either of which would cast doubt on (R5), since most who endorse (R5) do so on Existentialist grounds.

¹ Here and in what follows, names introduced for the relevant principles are my own.

2.1. The argument from logical-modality links

The first argument against Existentialism turns on the following claims:

- (i) Some sentences which are directly about contingent things are logical truths.
- (ii) Every proposition expressed by a logical truth exists necessarily.

These together entail the falsity of Existentialism. (i) is quite plausible. Merricks defends (ii) via a connection between logical consequence and modality. Let's say that the *proposition-analogue* of an argument A with sentences as premises and conclusions is the argument with the propositions expressed by A 's premises and conclusion as its premises and conclusions. Then Merricks defends

LOGIC-MODALITY If A is logically valid, then A 's proposition-analogue is modally valid.

One may then argue as follows. An argument with no premises and a logical truth as conclusion is logically valid; so its proposition-analogue is modally valid. But then it follows from the definition of modal validity that, necessarily, the conclusion of that argument is true. And this, plus TRUTH-EXISTENCE, entails (ii).

To see how the Existentialist should reply to this argument, we'll need to think about how she should think about the modal status of propositions. A good way into this topic begins with a familiar puzzle raised by negative existential propositions like

NO-SOCRATES Socrates does not exist.

It certainly seems as though it is possible that Socrates not exist. But it also seems plausible that every instance of the following schema is true:

POSSIBILITY-TRUTH If it is possible that S , then there is some world w such that, were w actual, the proposition that S would be true.

So there is some world w —obviously, a world in which Socrates does not exist—which is such that, were w actual, NO-SOCRATES would be true. But then from TRUTH-EXISTENCE it follows that, were w actual, NO-SOCRATES would exist; and then from Existentialism it follows that, were w actual, Socrates would exist—a contradiction.

Thanks to Plantinga (1983) and others, this problem for the Existentialist is very well-known. There are two main replies.²

The first is simply to deny the property actualist assumption TRUTH-EXISTENCE, and say that, were w actual, NO-SOCRATES would be true—but would not exist.³ Let's call someone who takes this path a 'Type 1 Russellian.' Since the Type 1 Russellian denies TRUTH-EXISTENCE and hence presumably (ii), she has nothing to fear from Merricks' argument.

The second is to deny POSSIBILITY-TRUTH. Let's call someone who takes this path a 'Type 2 Russellian.' This route may—though it need not be—explicated via a distinction

² Here as elsewhere I set aside—only for space reasons—the the Existentialist view of Williamson (2002) that Socrates (and everything else) exists necessarily.

³ This is the view of, among others, Salmon (1987, 1998).

between truth ‘in’ and truth ‘at’ a world. The idea, as applied to NO-SOCRATES, would be, roughly, that

NO-SOCRATES is true at w iff, were w actual, it is not the case that Socrates would exist.
NO-SOCRATES is true in w iff, were w actual, NO-SOCRATES would be true.

Given Existentialism and TRUTH-EXISTENCE, these two notions will come apart, for in worlds where Socrates does not exist, NO-SOCRATES will not exist. So NO-SOCRATES will not be true ‘in’ those worlds, despite being true ‘at’ them. The Type 2 Russellian will then say that our intuition that it is possible that Socrates not exist is tracking the fact that NO-SOCRATES is true ‘at’ some possible worlds—even though not true ‘in’ any. And from this no contradiction follows.⁴

Given that entailment is some sort of ‘following of necessity,’ this distinction between truth at and in a world will correspond to a distinction between two different entailment relations:

p entails₁ q iff, for every world w , if p is true at w , then q is true at w
 p entails₂ q iff, for every world w , if p is true in w , then q is true in w

Just as the Type 2 Russellian will say that our intuitions about possibility track truth at a world, she will say that our intuitions about what follows of necessity from what track entailment₁ rather than entailment₂. To see why, consider the following argument:

There are no flying pigs.
∴ It is not the case that Socrates is a flying pig.

It certainly seems like the proposition expressed by the conclusion follows of necessity from the proposition expressed by the premise. But (according to the Existentialist), the proposition expressed by the premise will not entail₂ the proposition expressed by the conclusion, since there are worlds in which the former is true but the latter does not exist. It does, however entail₁ the conclusion, since every world at which the proposition expressed by the premise is true is also a world at which the proposition expressed by the conclusion is true.

Now, LOGIC-MODALITY is equivalent to

If A is logically valid, then the premises of A ’s proposition-analogue entail₂ its conclusion.

But the Type 2 Russellian, as we have already seen, will interpret our intuitions about ‘following of necessity’ as tracking entailment₁. So if the Type 2 Russellian is willing to grant that there is some tidy connection between logical consequence and a modal relation between propositions,⁵ that connection will be, not LOGIC-MODALITY, but

If A is logically valid, then the premises of A ’s proposition-analogue entail₁ its conclusion.

⁴ The general approach is traceable to Prior and Fine (1977) and Adams (1981). The most important problem facing this view is the problem of generalizing the account of truth at a world.

⁵ Which may be doubted; see Blanchette (2000).

This blocks Merricks' argument, which is invalid if we replace LOGIC-MODALITY with the principle just stated.

Merricks opposes the idea that 'following of necessity' is to be understood in terms of entailment₁:

'Defenders of the venerable and widespread idea that some arguments are modally valid should all agree that an argument is modally valid only if there is some modal connection between the truth of a modally valid argument's conclusion and the truth of its premises. But the claim that an argument's conclusion is true *at all possible worlds at which its premises are true* does not imply that there is any modal connection between the truth of its conclusion and the truth of its premises.' (16)

Here, Merricks' complaint seems to be that the fact that p entails₁ q does not imply any connection between the worlds in which p is true and the worlds in which q is true. To which the obvious reply seems to be: 'Exactly. That is the point of the distinction between entailment₁ and entailment₂.' The complaint would be more serious if entailment₁ involved no modal connection of interest; but of course it does. Let's say that the condition a possible world must satisfy for p to be true at that world is p 's *truth condition*. If p entails₁ q then every world which satisfies p 's truth condition also satisfies q 's. What Merricks must do—and I think does not do—is explain why this sort of modal connection is not enough.

Here Merricks may be tempted to appeal to 'deference to the wisdom of the past and of the crowd.' (3) But this would be to overrate both the specificity and reliability of the past and the crowd. The quote from Aristotle, for instance, does not favor one of these views of entailment over the others; and in general the choice between which of these views of entailment best captures 'following of necessity' seems not best decided by appeal to authority.

Now, Merricks might reply that, whatever orthodox Russellians may say, TRUTH-EXISTENCE and LOGIC-MODALITY are in fact true, and one can hardly object to an argument by pointing out that opponents of its conclusion will reject a premise. That's fine. My only point is that—due to the very well-known puzzle posed by NO-SOCRATES—proponents of the Russellian orthodoxy are already committed to denying at least one of TRUTH-EXISTENCE and LOGIC-MODALITY. There is thus a sense in which Merricks' argument fails to engage with the positions which Russellians, whether rightly or wrongly, have staked out.⁶

2.2. Propositions existing without things they are directly about

The other type of argument that Merricks gives against Existentialism is an attempt to provide examples of propositions existing without one of the entities they are directly about. He gives (§5.IV–VI) a few versions of this sort of argument; the most challenging one focuses on names for things which never exist.

Merricks borrows from Salmon (1987) the example of 'Noman,' which is introduced as a name for the individual who would have (but never will) result from the union of some particular sperm S and egg E. Merricks then reasons as follows: Noman does not

⁶ Merricks gives a separate argument against Existentialism, at p. 117. But that argument can be blocked by analogues of the moves just discussed. See §5.VII for further arguments against Type 2 Russellianism.

exist. So, the proposition that Noman does not exist is true, and hence, by TRUTH-EXISTENCE, exists. But, by Existentialism, Noman is a constituent of this proposition and hence exists if the proposition does. But Noman does not exist. So, Existentialism is false (173–6).

It is by now a familiar point that the Type 1 Russellian has nothing to worry about here; he will say that the proposition that Noman does not exist is indeed true, but, like Noman, does not exist. (Indeed, the illustration of the falsity of TRUTH-EXISTENCE was one of the reasons for Salmon's original introduction of the example.) But how about a Russellian who accepts TRUTH-EXISTENCE?

There is no doubt that cases like 'Noman' are puzzling. But it is not clear to me that Merricks has identified a puzzle which is more difficult for the proponent of (R3) than for anyone else. There seem to be three views one could have about 'Noman': (i) it is a disguised definite description, (ii) it is a directly referring name which refers to Noman, or (iii) it is a directly referring name which has no reference.

Merricks argues (176–8) against (i); but even if (i) were true, it could be adopted by the Russellian (who after all need not say that anything which superficially looks like a name really is one). That leaves options (ii) and (iii). I assume that Merricks will not go for option (ii), since Noman does not exist, and hence is not around to be referred to. That leaves option (iii), which says that 'Noman' is an empty name. But if 'Noman' is an empty name, then (R3) does not entail that Noman is a constituent of the proposition that Noman does not exist. (Russellians do not, after all, claim that sentences involving names which do *not* refer to *o* typically have *o* as a constituent.) But then Merricks' argument against Existentialism dissolves.

What I think Merricks needs is some fourth view of the semantics of 'Noman' which both solves the present problem, and is unavailable to the Russellian. I don't yet see what that view is.

3. Merricks Against Propositional Constituency

In addition to these arguments against Existentialism, Merricks gives an interesting independent argument against (R3), which begins with the following claim:

'there is some proposition p and some numerically distinct proposition q such that p is a singular proposition about q and q is a singular proposition about p ' (166)

Given (R3), p has q as a constituent, and vice versa. But, Merricks argues, on any understanding of propositional constituency, this is impossible. If constituency is parthood, this violates the Antisymmetry principle that (at least if x , y do not wholly overlap) if x is a part of y and y a part of x , then $x = y$. And if constituency is set membership, then a case of the above sort will entail that p is a member of a member of itself, which violates the Axiom of Regularity. But, Merricks says,

'The literature on structured propositions takes constituency to be either parthood or set membership. And I cannot see what else a structured proposition's constituents could be, if not its parts or its members.' (169)

So, (R3) is false.

There are two main replies to be made. The first is that everyone who has tried in any serious way to develop the view that propositional constituency is parthood acknowledges that this view is apparently inconsistent with otherwise plausible mereological principles like Antisymmetry. The real debate is about whether the explanatory advantages of a mereological account of propositional constituency outweigh its revisionary costs.⁷ It would have been interesting to see engagement with this discussion rather than presentation of the apparent conflict as though this were the last word.

The second, more important point is that Merricks' conception of the space of structured propositions views seems a bit impoverished. It is simply not the case that the only alternatives in the literature on structured propositions identify propositional constituency with either parthood or set membership. Indeed, neither of the two most prominent recent attempts to give a theory of structured propositions—King's view of propositions as facts, and the view of Hanks and Soames that propositions are types of cognitive acts—fit either model. It is not easy to see how to run Merricks' argument here against either view.

Against this, Merricks might reply: 'But what does it mean to say that these facts, or cognitive acts, have *constituents*, if they don't have parts?' This is a good question, to which I return briefly below.

4. Merricks Against Propositions Having Forms

In Chapter 2, Merricks argues against (R2). He first argues, very reasonably, that logical consequence is a relation between sentences rather than propositions. He then concludes:

'Propositions never constitute arguments that are logically valid . . . An obvious upshot of this is that propositions do not have logical form So it is false, for example, that one proposition is literally the negation of another, or that one proposition is literally the conjunction of two others, and so on.' (78)

The claim that relations of logical consequence between sentences are distinct from relations of entailment between propositions will, I hope, not come as a shock to too many defenders of the Russellian orthodoxy. That distinction was one of the first lessons drilled into me in graduate school! What I don't see is why it is an 'obvious upshot' of this observation that no propositions are literally negations, conjunctions, etc.

It may help to say something about what proponents of the Russellian orthodoxy mean when they say that some propositions are literally negations, conjunctions, etc. On this view, propositions have constituents, which in many cases will be the semantic contents of expressions in sentences expressing those propositions. Expressions like 'not' and 'and' will have semantic contents; on one standard sort of view, they will express properties of (or relations between) propositions. Suppose 'not' expresses the property of being untrue. To say that one proposition is the negation of the other is then just to say that the first is a predication of this property of the second. (How 'is a predication of' is cashed out will depend on the particular view of structured propositions being given.)

Is it an obvious upshot of the fact that logical consequence is a relation between sentences that no propositions are negations of others, in this sense? Clearly not.

⁷ For interesting discussions, see Gilmore (2014) and Tillman and Fowler (2012). And as Mike Rea pointed out to me, others have used, for example, time travel cases to provide independent challenge to Antisymmetry.

Against this, Merricks might reasonably object: ‘OK, you’ve said what it takes for one proposition to be the negation of another, and in that sense have explained what it means for a proposition to be of a certain form. But what makes the forms that you talk about *logical*?’ This is a fair question, and I think that Russellians should be a bit more cautious in speaking of logical forms of propositions than they sometimes are. But if the central issue between Merricks and the Russellian is just whether the forms of propositions should be called ‘logical’ or not, this seems to be a merely verbal dispute.

5. Merricks Against Structured Propositions

Let’s turn, finally, to Merricks’ general argument against (R1), which rests on the following conditional:

If structured propositions exist, then there is a full explanation of why they have the representational properties they have.⁸

His aim is then to show that there is no such full explanation, and hence that the antecedent—(R1)—is false.

His argument for the negation of the consequent splits into two parts. Oversimplifying a bit, the argument is that either the explanation will be given in terms of things that thinking subjects do, or it won’t. If it does, this will entail (R5), which is false. And if it doesn’t, it is simply hard to see how the wanted full explanation could go, given that lots of things have constituents and don’t represent anything at all.

I’ve already discussed the ways in which Merricks’ arguments against (R5) can be resisted; those moves also provide a way of blocking Merricks’ argument here. But a separate reply is to question the credentials of the above conditional. Merricks says that it is ‘uncontroversial among defenders of structured propositions.’ (138) This is not correct. (I am a defender, and I deny it.) But setting aside questions about what structured propositionalists may or may not believe, why is the above conditional supposed to be more plausible than the parallel conditional

If unstructured propositions exist, then there is a full explanation of why they have the representational properties they have.

which, of course, Merricks will reject?

Merricks’ plausible thought is that there must be *some* motivation for positing structured propositions in the first place.⁹ And, as he convincingly argues, arguments from compositionality and logical form don’t do the trick (§4.III–IV). But there are other motivations. The structured propositionalist may think that the constituents of a proposition provide a partial explanation of that proposition’s representational properties. This seems to be the view suggested in Johnston (2006) (§XIV), which Merricks dismisses via the slightly awkward argument that Johnston thereby refuses to accept a demand for full explanation accepted by all structured propositionalists. Or, alternatively, the structured propositionalist might posit constituents of propositions to explain the distinctness of

⁸ See, among other places, 138–9.

⁹ See §6.III.

propositions which are true in just the same possible worlds. There is, in short, plenty of scope for the structured propositionalist to resist the demand for explanation expressed by the above conditional without rendering her claim that propositions have constituents simply wanton.

Nonetheless, Merricks and I—at last!—find a point of agreement here. Structured propositionals have not always been as clear as they could have been, either about what the claim that propositions have constituents means, or about what, exactly, this claim is supposed to explain. To see this, it is important to distinguish between claims about what propositions *are*—like King’s claim that propositions are facts, Hanks’ and Soames’ claims that propositions are certain sorts of cognitive acts, and my and Richard’s claims that propositions are certain sorts of properties¹⁰—and the further, perhaps dispensable claim that these facts, acts, or properties have constituents in some metaphysically serious sense. Even if its arguments against the Russellian orthodoxy fail to convince, *Propositions* should push structured propositionals to better articulate, not just the meaning, but the explanatory import of their claims. This would be a very good thing.¹¹

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¹⁰ See, respectively, King (2014), Hanks (2015), Soames (2015), Speaks (2014), and Richard (2014).

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