



Cognitive Acts and the Unity of the Proposition

Jeff Speaks

University of Notre Dame

ABSTRACT

In this paper I do four things. (1) I explain one clear thing that ‘the problem of the unity of the proposition’ might mean. (2) I lay out a few different versions of the theory of propositions as cognitive acts, and explain why this problem arises for the version of that theory which has been defended in different forms by Peter Hanks and Scott Soames. (3) I argue that the natural ways in which the act theorist might try to solve the problem fail to solve it; (4) I propose a way to fix the problem, and then I explain how the problem re-emerges in the act theorist’s treatment of propositional attitude relations.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 2 October 2018; Revised 26 July 2019

KEYWORDS propositions; unity of the proposition; act theories

1. The Problem of the Unity of the Proposition

The phrase ‘the problem of the unity of the proposition’ is sometimes used in such a way as to suggest that it is a problem for anyone who believes in propositions.¹ The idea, it seems, is that anyone who believes in propositions must explain in what their unity consists.

But it is hard to see why this should be so. We don’t usually take people who believe in the existence of the number 4 or the property of being red to face the difficult task of explaining what the unity of the number 4 or the unity of the property of being red consists in; why should propositions be any different?

The short answer, I think, is that they don’t have to be. There are plenty of views of propositions that face no special ‘problem of the unity of the proposition’. A case in point is the widely held view that propositions are sets of worlds. Unless one holds that anyone who believes in sets must explain ‘in what the unity of the set consists’, it is hard to see why the proponent of a possible worlds theory of propositions should face any special problem of the unity of the proposition. The same goes for theorists who take propositions to be simple *sui generis* abstract objects, on par in this respect with the property of being red.² This view, like the possible worlds theory, faces serious objections—but I don’t think that the problem of the unity of the proposition is one of them.

So, the problem of the unity of the proposition is not a problem for all believers in propositions. For whom is it a problem, then? I think that it is a problem for theorists

¹ See, for example, Gaskin [2008].

² See, for example, Plantinga [1974] and Merricks [2015].

who try to explain what propositions are by first enumerating some entities that are not propositions, but that are in some way bound up with the identity of propositions. Often these are called ‘constituents’; but, to avoid associations which that term now has, I will call them ‘elements’. If one attempts to explain what propositions are by listing some things—the elements—that are not propositions, it is pretty obvious that one owes us an account of how propositions are related to those elements. (Otherwise, one has simply failed to say what propositions are.) And that is just to give an account of how those elements are united into a proposition.³

Much contemporary discussion of the problem of the unity of the proposition takes as its starting-point the classical theories of Russell and Frege. And so it is notable that both Russell and Frege try to explain what propositions are by enumerating their elements. In his discussion of the proposition that A differs from B, Russell says [1903: sec. 54] that the constituents of the proposition are A, difference, and B. But, of course, none of these things *is* the proposition that A differs from B; they are just, in my neutral terminology, elements of it. Thus (as he recognises), Russell faces the task of explaining how the proposition is related to these elements—how, that is, these elements are unified into a proposition.

Although matters are less clear with Frege, on one reading his approach is parallel to Russell’s except for the fact that he begins with different elements. In this case the elements are senses, which are modes of presentation of objects and concepts.⁴ Just as Russell owes us an explanation of the way in which the proposition that A differs from B is related to his elements—A, difference, and B— so Frege owes us an explanation of the way in which propositions are related to his elements. And to give such an explanation just is to explain what unifies the relevant modes of presentation into a proposition.

2. Four Versions of the Theory of Propositions as Cognitive Acts

I now want to sketch a leading recent theory of propositions, and to explain why this theory faces the problem of the unity of the proposition in a way that is exactly parallel to the way in which Russell and Frege faced this problem. This is the theory of propositions as cognitive acts, a theory that has been defended, in different forms, by Peter Hanks and Scott Soames.⁵ While this view of propositions has been widely discussed, the fact that it faces this problem seems not to have been noticed. And, as I’ll argue in the sections to follow, the problem, once noticed, is not easily solved.

Why might one find promising the view that propositions are cognitive acts? There are, I think, three central reasons. First, the view promises to demystify both the metaphysics and the epistemology of propositions. On this view, propositions are simply acts, and we can entertain a proposition by performing that act. Second, it promises to explain the representational properties of propositions. Cognitive acts are things that subjects perform, and so a view that identifies propositions with cognitive acts promises to explain the representational properties of propositions in terms of the representational powers of subjects. Third, it promises to provide the resources for solving

³ This is closest to the ‘unity question 1’ discussed by King [2009, 2013].

⁴ This is perhaps clearest in Frege [1923/1963: 1], where he proposes that ‘we look upon thoughts as composed of simple parts, and take these, in turn, to correspond to the simple parts of sentences.’ On the other hand, this passage is immediately preceded by the remark that ‘we really talk figuratively when we transfer the relation of whole and part to thoughts.’

⁵ See Hanks [2011, 2015] and Soames [2012, 2013, 2014, 2015].

one of the most intractable families of problems in semantics—the problem of explaining differences in cognitive significance between propositions which are alike with respect to the objects, properties, and relations that they represent. (I return to this third point below.)

While there are many interesting and important differences between the theories of Hanks and Soames, those differences are mainly orthogonal to the discussion that follows; so, for simplicity, I'll more closely follow Soames's exposition of his theory. To get a sense of the view, let's start with the simplest case—a singular proposition which predicates a property F of some object o . Entertaining this singular proposition involves cognizing o , cognizing F , and predicating F of o . Because it will be useful to have abbreviations for these act-types, I'll represent these simple acts as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} &\text{COG}(o) \\ &\text{COG}(F) \\ &\text{PRED}(F, o) \end{aligned}$$

For our purposes, we can leave the notion of cognizing an object or property at the intuitive level: one can think of it as thinking of, or calling to mind, an object or property. I will follow Soames in thinking of predication as a force-less mental act, in the sense that predicating a property of an object (or a relation of an n -tuple of objects) does not involve endorsing, in any sense, the claim that the object has that property (or that the objects stand in the relevant relation). To predicate F of o is just to entertain the proposition that o is F , and not to judge that it is true.⁶

On the view under consideration, propositions are cognitive acts. But which ones are they? One option—which I'll call the *simple-act theory*—simply identifies propositions with acts of predication. So, according to the simple-act theory,

$$\text{the proposition that } o \text{ is } F = \text{PRED}(F, o)$$

While some of their expositions of the view may suggest that they endorse the simple-act theory, Hanks and Soames reject it. The reason why emerges from consideration of one of the central explanatory ambitions of their theories.

A well-known problem for broadly Russellian approaches to content is that they identify certain intuitively distinct propositions that represent just the same objects as having just the same properties and standing in just the same relations. A familiar sort of example is given by the following pair:

- (1) I am on fire.
- (2) That [said while viewing an object in a mirror] is on fire.

Suppose that some object o is the referent both of 'I' in (1) and of 'that' in (2). It is a familiar point that, intuitively, these sentences might still seem to express different propositions. It is, for example, easy enough to find examples of attitude ascriptions

⁶ This is one of the central points of disagreement between the theories of Soames and Hanks; since (as far as I can see) it does not matter much for the discussion in the next few sections, I simply adopt Soames's view for ease of exposition. This difference between their respective views will be important to the discussion in section 4 of judgment, and I return to it there. For Hanks's criticism of Soames's view of predication, see Hanks [2015: sec. 1.3].

that differ only in the substitution of sentences like (1) and (2) but that nonetheless seem to differ in truth-value.

There is thus not-inconsiderable theoretical pressure to find some conception of propositions on which (1) and (2) can, in some sense, express distinct propositions. There is, of course, disagreement about what the sense is in which these sentences can express different propositions. On some views, this is a claim about what these sentences semantically express; on others, it is a claim about what they would typically be used to assert or pragmatically convey. This dispute over semantic vs pragmatic renderings of the problem of the first-person is, as far as I can see, orthogonal to the questions that I want to raise; so, in what follows, I will use the relatively neutral ‘express’, assuming that what I say can be transposed into either the semantic or the pragmatic way of construing the problem. I will use ‘(1P)’, ‘(2P)’, etc. as names for the propositions expressed, in this neutral sense of ‘express’, by (1), (2), etc., and I will assume, with Hanks and Soames, that we want a conception of propositions according to which $(1P) \neq (2P)$.

The obvious problem is that the simple-act theory does not give us the resources with which to distinguish between (1P) and (2P). That is because both of these propositions are, on the simple-act theory, the act of predicating the property of being on fire of the same individual. So, according to the simple-act theory,

$$(1P) = (2P) = \text{PRED}(\text{on fire}, o)$$

The problem is a general one. Other parallel examples of representationally identical and yet apparently distinct propositions—like those expressed by sentences that differ only by the substitution of coreferential names—would lead to parallel problems. So, while I’ll focus on the version of the problem that arises in cases like (1) and (2), this version is illustrative, rather than because there is anything special about it as opposed to other ‘Frege cases’.

Both Hanks and Soames, by contrast with the simple-act theory, develop their versions of the act theory of propositions to make room for a genuine distinction between (1P) and (2P). Here is what Soames says about the distinction between propositions like (1P) and (2P) [2015: 46]:

The new analysis springing from the cognitive conception of propositions distinguishes predicating P of an agent A identified as predication target *in the first-person way* from predicating P of A *however identified*. Since doing the first is also doing the second, but not conversely, the acts are different. Since the same property is predicated of the same thing, they are cognitively distinct but representationally identical propositions.

Here, Soames invokes a new sort of cognitive act—namely, thinking of oneself in a first-person way. Much as we used ‘PRED’ as a name for the cognitive act of predication, and ‘COG(*o*)’ as a name for the act of cognizing *o*, let’s use ‘1STP(*o*)’ as a name for the cognitive act of thinking of *o* in a first-person way. It is clear that the distinction between thinking of oneself in a first-person way and simply cognizing oneself in some way or other is supposed to explain the distinction between the cognitive acts (1P) and (2P); but how?

Here there are, I think, three options. One option is to treat the first-person way of cognizing as a modification of a target of predication. On this sort of view, we might represent the proposition expressed by (1) as follows:

$$(1P) = \text{PRED}(\text{on fire}, \text{1stP}(o))$$

By contrast, to entertain the proposition expressed by (2), one need not think of *o* in a first-person way; one must think of it in a perceptual-demonstrative way. Let's use 'DEM(*o*)' as a name for the relevant act of thinking of *o* in a perceptual-demonstrative way. We might then represent (2P) as follows:

$$(2P) = \text{PRED}(\text{on fire, DEM}(o))$$

Let's call this the *quasi-Fregean act theory*.

This does not seem to me to be a promising approach. The central problem is the difficulty of seeing what sort of entity could be denoted by '1stP(*o*)' or 'DEM(*o*)'. A first thought is that they denote cognitive acts of thinking about an object. But actions are not the sorts of things that can be on fire, and hence are not the sorts of things of which any sane subject would predicate this property. But what else could it be? It is hard to see what we could reasonably predicate this property of, other than of an individual—and to treat the relevant individual as the target of predication is simply to collapse back into the simple-act theory, and erase the proposed distinction between (1P) and (2P).

This is a simple objection, but it seems to me that there really is no way of getting around it. Either the act of predication with which (1P) is identified is an act of predicating being on fire of a certain individual—namely, *o*—or it is an act of predicating being on fire of some other entity. On the former option, we have no explanation of how (1P) differs from (2P). On the latter option, we are owed an account of what this other entity is, such that it both (i) involves the first-person way of thinking and (ii) is a reasonable thing of which to predicate being on fire. It is just hard to see what sort of entity this could be.

What we want is to preserve the simple-act theory's view that both (1P) and (2P) involve predicating the property of being on fire of an individual, while, like the quasi-Fregean act theory, somehow involving first-person ways of thinking of individuals in the nature of (1P). One way to do this would be to treat ways of cognizing objects as modifications, not of the targets of predication, but of the act of predication itself. On this view, we would identify (1P) with the act of predicating-while-thinking-in-a-first-person-way being aflame of *o*, and (2P) with the act of predicating-while-thinking-in-a-visual-demonstrative-way being aflame of *o*. This would get us the distinction between (1P) and (2P), while avoiding the problems faced by the quasi-Fregean act theory. I'll call this the *types-of-predication act theory*.

If we follow this route, we will end up with indefinitely many types of predication. There are, after all, many different kinds of visual-demonstrative ways of cognizing, each of which will, on this view, come with its own type of act of predication. And when we consider the difference between the propositions expressed by (3) and (4),

- (3) I am chasing that guy
- (4) That guy is chasing me,

it becomes clear that we will have to distinguish between the act of predicating-while-thinking-in-a-first-person-way-of-the-first-argument-place the chasing relation and predicating-while-thinking-in-a-first-person-way-of-the-second-argument-place that relation.

Given this very long list of kinds of acts of predication, the natural question is that of whether we are to understand the distinctions between these kinds of acts as primitive,

or whether instead we can explain the distinction between the act of predicating-while-thinking-in-a-first-person-way and the act of predicating-while-thinking-in-a-visual-demonstrative-way in terms of the natures of those types of cognitive act.

The first option seems extremely unattractive. It is just hard to believe that there are indefinitely many cognitive act types of this sort, with nothing to be said about what makes them distinct from each other. So, it seems that the types-of-predication theorist should provide some explanation of what distinguishes between these various types of predication. But the problem of how to do this is just the problem that the types-of-predication act theory was introduced to solve—the problem of explaining how, for example, the first-person way of thinking of an object gets into a proposition that involves the act of predicating some property of that object. One could, for example, explain predicating-while-thinking-in-a-first-person-way of o as predicating a property of o -thought-of-in-a-first-person-way. But that would just be to lapse into the quasi-Fregean act theory discussed above.

A better way to develop the act theory of propositions is suggested by the quotation above from Soames: we identify (1P), not with a simple act of predication, but with a complex action that includes as sub-acts both the act of predicating being on fire of a certain individual and the act of cognizing that individual in a first-person way. I'll call this (the fourth version of the act theory that we've considered) the *complex-act theory*.⁷

To have a neutral way of representing complex acts, I will use ' $\phi \oplus \psi$ ' to represent the complex act whose constituent acts are ϕ and ψ . The complex-act theorist then holds that the singular proposition that o is F is the complex act (S):

$$(S) = \text{PRED}(F, o) \oplus \text{COG}(o) \oplus \text{COG}(F)$$

Using the distinction between simply cognizing o and thinking of o in a first-person or visual-demonstrative way, the complex-act theorist might then explain the distinction between (1P) and (2P) as follows:

$$(1P) = \text{PRED}(\text{on fire}, o) \oplus \text{1stP}(o) \oplus \text{COG}(\text{being on fire})$$

$$(2P) = \text{PRED}(\text{on fire}, o) \oplus \text{DEM}(o) \oplus \text{COG}(\text{being on fire})$$

Since one can think of o in a first-person way only if one cognizes o , one can perform (1P) only if one performs (S). But one can perform (S) yet not (1P) if one cognizes o in something other than the first-person way. And this seems to be exactly what we should want, since it seems that entertaining a first-person proposition entails entertaining the corresponding singular proposition, but not the converse. Analogous points hold for the relationship between (S) and (2P).

This account of the difference between (1P) and (2P) brings out one of the exciting things about the projects of Hanks and Soames. Both promise to explain first-person propositions without employing any theoretical resources other than those that are already on hand in our initial description of the problem to be addressed. It is hard

⁷ This is Soames's preferred view (personal communication). It is less clear to me whether Hanks's view is best understood as a version of the quasi-Fregean act theory or instead as a version of the complex-act theory. On the one hand, his way of representing propositions suggests the quasi-Fregean interpretation; on the other hand, he thinks that we predicate properties like being on fire of individuals rather than of some other mysterious sort of entity, which suggests that he would not endorse that interpretation.

to make sense of first-person Fregean senses; but anyone who accepts the intuitive distinction between (1) and (2) must already grant the existence of a distinction between thinking of oneself in a first-person way and thinking of oneself in a non-first-person way.⁸ So, complex-act theories promise to deliver the Fregean's attractive distinctions between contents without invoking the dubious apparatus of Fregean senses—and to do this is to deliver something like the holy grail of contemporary work on mind and language.

3. The Problem of the Unity of Complex Acts

But, in one very obvious sense, the theory of propositions as complex acts is parallel to the theories of Russell and Frege. The theory is an attempt to tell us what propositions are. But if we ask what the proposition that *o* is *F* is, we are given a list of things, none of which is identical to that proposition—the act of cognizing *o*, the act of cognizing *F*, and the act of predicating *F* of *o*. These are, in the above sense, elements of the proposition that *o* is *F*: they are (according to the present theory) part of the explanation of what that proposition is, but none of them *is* that proposition. We are thus owed an account of how the complex act that is the proposition that *o* is *F* is related to these elements—an account of what unifies these acts into a proposition.

3.1 Conjunctive-Act Theories

This much, I think, is not really disputable. What is disputable is whether this is a very serious challenge to the theory of propositions as complex acts. For a natural response to this point is to grant that the complex-act theory of propositions faces the problem of the unity of the proposition—but to point out that the problem, as it arises in this context, is very easily solved. For the act theorist can say that to perform a complex act just is to perform all of the sub-acts of which it is composed.⁹ This is, in effect, to interpret ' \oplus ' as '&'. Let's call this the *conjunctive-act theory*.

The conjunctive-act theory is a reasonably natural first interpretation of the way in which Hanks and Soames typically explicate their views. In explaining what some proposition is, Hanks and Soames typically explain the acts that make up the relevant complex act—and stop there. For example, in explaining which proposition is expressed by 'George is clever', Hanks [2011: 13] says that it 'has three components: (i) reference to George, (ii) expression of the property of cleverness, and (iii) predication'. Having given explanations of the nature of acts (i)–(iii), Hanks takes himself to have explained what the relevant proposition is, which suggests that there is nothing to the performance of the composite act beyond the performance of its components. Soames's explanations of the nature of various propositions are the same in this respect.

Despite initial appearances, both Soames and Hanks (personal communication) reject the picture of propositions given by the conjunctive-act theory. But that theory is still worth discussing, because the problems that the theory encounters bring out the challenges that face any adequate account of the unity of proposition, on the view that propositions are complex acts.

⁸ Hanks [2013] gives an account of what distinguishes first-person reference to an object from other ways of cognizing objects. Soames leaves the notion unanalysed.

⁹ Or, perhaps, to perform each of these acts within a certain interval.

The basic problem for the conjunctive-act theory is very simple. According to the theory, to perform the complex act to which (1P) is identical is simply to perform the acts of which it is composed. But a moment's reflection shows that this can't be right. I might be thinking of myself in a first-person way while also predicating the property of being aflame of *o* without entertaining (1P), simply because I might be thinking other thoughts about myself in a first-person way while thinking that a person seen in a mirror—who of course turns out to be me—is on fire. So, if (1P) is a complex act, something stronger than simply performing all, or performing all at the same time, must bind together the simple acts of which it is composed. Hence, performing the complex act with which we are identifying this proposition must involve something over and above performing each of the acts that compose it. Our question is, 'What is this extra something that one must do?'

It is very natural for the complex-act theorist to address this worry with the following intuitive thought: the complex acts with which propositions are identical are not just a matter of performing a plurality of acts; rather, they are a matter of performing certain acts *by* performing others. There is obviously a distinction between my getting rich by playing the lottery and my getting rich while playing the lottery—where, in the second case, my newly found wealth has no connection to my gambling habits. Surely, one might think, we can appeal to the same distinction to solve the present problem: there is a distinction between my predicating being-aflame of *o* by thinking of *o* in a first-person way, and my predicating being-aflame of this object while thinking of myself in a first-person way. And, once we have this distinction on the table, we might apply it to the problem at hand.

This is an appealing thought. And in one way it is completely unobjectionable. It is of course true that there are such things as complex acts. The question is whether we can use our prior grip on complex acts to understand the nature of propositions, as the complex-act theorist thinks of them.

There are two natural stories to tell about the unity of complex acts. One is broadly intentional: on this view, when we say that my walking to the refrigerator was part of my act of getting a beer, or that I got a beer by walking to the refrigerator, we are saying something about my propositional attitudes regarding the different sub-acts and their relations to each other (for example, my belief that one action is a means to another). A second natural story to tell here is broadly causal: on this view, when we say that these various acts were all parts of my act of getting a beer, we are saying something about the causal relations between these sub-acts and my eventual acquisition of the beer.

These two different views of complex actions need not be thought of as rivals. We can speak of collections of actions that are united by certain mental states of their agent, and we can speak of collections of actions that stand to each other in certain close causal relations. For different purposes, one might wish to focus on one, rather than the other, sort of complex act.

I'll argue, in the next two sections, that neither the intentional nor the causal story is well-suited to the purposes of the complex-act theory of propositions. But it is worth emphasizing that it is no part of my aim to call into question the reality of complex actions. Rather, my question is that of whether, given two natural and in-themselves-unobjectionable ways of understanding complex actions, it makes sense to think of propositions as complex acts.

3.2 Intentional Theories of Complex Acts

Sometimes when we say that someone ϕ s by ψ ing, we mean that that ψ ing was part of that individual's plan for ϕ ing. One might cash this out in different ways; here I want to focus on a way of understanding this that analyses plans at least partly in terms of the propositional attitudes of the subject in question. On one simple version of this kind of view, for ψ to be part of my plan for ϕ ing is for me to intend to ϕ , to believe that I can ϕ by ψ ing, and to intend to ψ at least in part because of my intention to ϕ and my means-end belief.

Let's think about how we might use this sort of relation between acts to understand the complex acts with which we want to identify propositions. If we focus on the case of first-person propositions, the idea would be that I not only think of myself in the first-person way while predicating being aflame of o , "but also believe that I can predicate being aflame of o by thinking of o in a first-person way, and intend to think of o in a first-person way at least partly" because of this means-end belief and my intention to predicate being-aflame of o .

But this appears to be a non-starter for the complex-act theorist, for two reasons. The first is that it involves a wild over-intellectualisation of first-personal thought. First-person thought seems to be among the most primitive forms of mental representation; it would be surprising (to put it mildly) if it required the ability to form intentions and means-end beliefs with respect to mental acts.

Second, this theory or any like it seems to lead to a vicious regress. We are trying to explain what it is for me to entertain a proposition p via my intentions and beliefs. But those intentions and beliefs will have propositions other than p as their contents; and, to have those intentions and beliefs, I will have to entertain these other propositions; and so on, without end. The problem here is not just that on the present view entertaining one proposition entails entertaining infinitely many. The problem is that this infinite series is not well-founded. For any proposition p , entertaining p depends on entertaining a distinct proposition q , which in turn depends on entertaining a distinct proposition r , ... and so on. It is plausible that this sort of infinite non-well-founded series of acts is, at least for finite creatures like us, impossible.

There is no general regress problem here for the view that some complex acts are best understood as unified by the propositional attitudes of the agent. No doubt, some are. The regress arises from the identification of the act of entertaining a proposition with a complex act, so understood. If propositions are complex acts, they can't be complex acts of this sort.¹⁰

3.3 Causal Theories of Complex Acts

It may seem, and I think it is, much more promising for the complex-act theorist to appeal to broadly causal, rather than intentional, relations. However, as I'll argue in this section, the most natural first ways in which one might think to develop a

¹⁰ One might try to get around these problems by giving a dispositional version of the intentional theory. On one version of this idea, one's ϕ ing is part of one's plan for ψ ing iff one is disposed to intend to ψ because of an intention to ϕ and one is disposed to believe that ϕ ing is a means to ψ ing. This would solve the over-intellectualisation and regress problems. But it would run into basically the same problem as faced the conjunctive-act theory. I could predicate being-aflame of an object (myself) seen in a mirror while also thinking of myself in a first-person way and while possessing the dispositions just described without entertaining (1P). (Thanks to two anonymous referees for very helpful comments about the arguments in this section.)

theory of this sort face problems that seem to have no easy solution. If finding a defensible version of the theory of propositions as complex acts depends on finding an appropriate causal theory of those complex acts, then it is very much an open question whether there is a defensible version of the complex-act theory of propositions.

The central problem for causal complex-act theories of propositions is that the facts about the causal relations between an agent's cognitive acts seem to underdetermine the facts about which propositions that subject entertains. Here is a pair of examples to bring this out.

In the first case, a subject sees an object (which turns out to be herself) in a mirror, and this act of cognizing the object causes her to predicate the property of being-aflake of the object. We might represent the causal structure of the subject's mental acts as

$$\text{DEM}(o) \Rightarrow \text{PRED}(\text{on fire}, o)$$

The causal theorist should say, it seems, that this suffices for the subject to entertain (2P).

In the second case, a subject again sees herself in the mirror. In this case, the subject's act of cognizing herself in a perceptual-demonstrative way does not immediately cause her to predicate being-aflake of *o*. Instead, that act causes her to (for whatever reason) cognize herself in a first-person way. When she thinks of herself in the first-person way, she notices that she is on fire, and so predicates being-aflake of herself. We can represent the causal structure of the relevant mental acts in this case as

$$\text{DEM}(o) \Rightarrow \text{1stP}(o) \Rightarrow \text{pred}(\text{on fire}, o)$$

The causal theorist should say, it seems, that this suffices for the subject to entertain (1P). But does it also suffice for her to entertain (2P)?

Intuitively, it does not. The subject in the second case might never recognise that she is the object that she has seen in the mirror, and hence might never entertain the thought that the object in the mirror is on fire. Having discovered that she herself is on fire, she could be forgiven for forgetting entirely about the object seen in the mirror.

The problem is that it is difficult to square this verdict with the causal complex-act theory of propositions. For even in the second case the act of cognizing herself in a perceptual-demonstrative way does cause (albeit indirectly) the act of predication. So why, in this case, does the causal structure of the agent's mental acts not suffice for entertaining (2P)?

Those familiar with the philosophy of action will recognise a structural similarity between this challenge to the causal complex-act theory of propositions and the cases of 'deviant causation' that plague causal theories of intentional action. Here's Davidson's classic example of the latter [1973: 78–9]:

A climber might want to rid himself of the weight and danger of holding another man on a rope, and he might know that by loosening his hold on the rope he could rid himself of the weight and danger. This belief and want might so unnerve him as to cause him to loosen his hold, and yet it might be the case that he never chose to loosen his hold, nor did he do it intentionally.

Here we have a suitable belief and desire causing an action without that action being performed intentionally. These cases seem to show that intentional action requires something more than causation by suitable belief-desire pairs; the causal theorist has to say what this 'something more' is.

Just so, cases like the sort described above seem to show that entertaining a proposition requires something more than the relevant act of cognizing an object causing the relevant act of predicating a property of an object. One who identifies propositions with constellations of simple cognitive acts and the causal relations between them has to say what this ‘something more’ is.

Given the amount of attention that the problem of deviant causal chains has attracted in the philosophy of action, it is natural to look to that literature for a solution to the problem as it arises for the causal complex-act theory of propositions. Let’s look at a few prominent approaches.¹¹

One suggestion starts with the idea that deviant causation is always indirect causation.¹² It is natural to think that what distinguishes between the two cases described above is that in the first case, but not the second, the act of cognizing the object in a perceptual-demonstrative way is an immediate cause of the act of predication. In the second case, by contrast, the causal chain takes a detour through another act of cognizing the object. (This is just as, in Davidson’s case, the causal chain from the belief-desire pair to the action takes a detour through the agent’s becoming unnerved.) This suggests the view that a subject entertains $\phi \oplus \psi$ iff the subject’s ϕ ing is the immediate cause of her ψ ing.

But these conditions on entertaining a proposition are too strong. The act of cognizing myself in a first-person way might cause me to cognize myself in a visual-demonstrative way, while recognising throughout that I am the object so cognized. The resultant visual-demonstrative act of cognizing myself might then be the immediate cause of my predicating being-aflame of myself. This series of cognitive acts seems clearly consistent with my having entertained (1P), despite the fact that my act of cognizing myself in a first-person way is not the immediate cause of the act of predication. This example differs from the case of deviant causation discussed above, in that the subject recognises that she is cognizing the same object in two different ways; but, given that we have already ruled out intentional complex-act theories, it is hard to see how the causal complex-act theorist could build into her account this difference in the subject’s mental states.

A second suggestion for solving the problem of causal deviance as it arises in the action case is to require that the action stand in a closer explanatory relation to the relevant mental states than is required for the latter to be among the causes of the former. On one prominent way of developing this suggestion, what is required is that the relevant mental states ‘differentially explain’ the action, in the sense that the laws underwriting the explanation provide a one-to-one function between the relevant features of the mental states and the relevant features of the action (see Peacocke [1979]). But the corresponding proposal would be much too strong in the present case, as a subject’s cognizing an object in a certain way is compatible with her predicating any number of properties of that object.

A third suggestion from the theory of action is that intentional actions must be guided as well as caused by the relevant mental states, where guidance requires

¹¹ In what follows, I am indebted to the useful overview of that literature by Mayr [2011: ch. 5]. It is standard to distinguish between the problem of causal deviance as it applies to basic actions (as in the case of the climber) and as it applies to non-basic actions. The latter is often handled by reference to the agent’s plan for carrying out the relevant non-basic action. (See, for example, Bishop [1990].) As appeal to plans would involve appeal to propositional attitudes of the subject, I ignore this kind of treatment here.

¹² In the theory of action, a version of this idea is defended by Brand [1984].

‘[s]ustained causation of a process towards a goal’ [Setiya 2007: 32]. But this also seems, in the present context, too strong. Cognizing an object in a certain way makes possible various acts of predicating a property of that object; but it does not guide the subject to predicate one property of it rather than another. This already follows from the possibility, discussed in response to the first solution above, that one can entertain $\phi \oplus \psi$ even if one’s ϕ ing is only an indirect cause of one’s ψ ing.

These three responses obviously do not exhaust the possibilities for the causal complex-act theorist. But the problems that they encounter do, I think, make clear some of the challenges facing someone who develops a complex-act theory of propositions in this way.

4. The Problem of the Unity of Judgment

So far, I’ve argued for two conclusions. The first is that complex-act theories of propositions face a problem of the unity of the proposition in the same clear and easy-to-understand sense in which the theories of Russell and Frege face this problem. The second is that the solutions to this problem that spring most readily to mind are insufficient to solve it.

At this stage, it might be tempting to jettison the complex-act theory of propositions in favour of the simple-act theory. The simple-act theory, after all, does not face the sort of problem, of the unity of the proposition, on which we’ve been focusing. There is no more a special problem of the unity of the act of predicating F of o than there is a special problem of the unity of the act of putting x next to y .¹³

This move would involve significantly scaling back the explanatory ambitions of the act theory of propositions, since we would lose the complex-act theory’s explanation of first-person propositions and other ‘Frege cases’. But we could keep other perceived advantages of the act theory, such as its explanation of the representational properties of propositions.¹⁴ If the problems laid out in the preceding section look sufficiently intractable, the trade-off might be worth it.

The purpose of this last section is to argue that this move is not quite as straightforward as it seems. Even if one adopts a simple-act theory, the problems of unity discussed above re-emerge in a surprising way when we turn our attention from the nature of propositions to the nature of propositional attitude relations.

Let’s consider Soames’s version of the act theory, according to which one can predicate a property of an object, and so entertain the proposition that the object has the property, without endorsing the claim that the object has the property. On this kind of view, it is natural to think that judging that o is F will require predicating F of o ; but it is obvious that judging that o is F will require the agent to do something extra as well.

What is this something extra, in the case of judgment? One option would be for it to involve attributing some property to the act of predication itself. But this, as Soames agrees, would be a mistake: subjects can stand in propositional attitude relations to contents without being cognitively sophisticated enough to have thoughts about their own cognitive acts.

¹³ As King [2013: 89] in effect notes (although he is discussing a slightly different version of Soames’s theory).

¹⁴ Although I’m a bit sceptical about whether the proposed sort of explanation is much of a theoretical virtue. For some discussion of the point, see Speaks [2014].

Here is what Soames says about judgment [2015: 18]:

To judge that B is red is to perform the predication in an affirmative manner, which involves accepting it as a basis for possible action. To affirm or accept that B is red is not to predicate any property of the act, or to make it an object of cognition, but for one's performance of it to involve forming, or activating already formed, dispositions to act, both cognitively and behaviorally, toward B in ways conditioned by one's attitudes toward red things.

Given that we want to understand judgment in such a way as not to require judging subjects to attribute properties to their own cognitive acts, something like this seems like a very natural approach for an act theorist to take.

To see how the problems for the complex-act theory re-emerge here, note that judging that *o* is *F*, on Soames's view, involves satisfying the following two conditions:

- (i) predicating *F* of *o*
- (ii) forming or activating dispositions to act toward *o* in ways conditioned by the subject's attitudes toward things that are *F*

But it is clear that (as Soames recognises) individually satisfying these two conditions is not sufficient for judgment. To see this, consider first a subject who satisfies (ii) but not (i). Such a subject will, intuitively, be acting as though he believes that *o* is *F* without judging that *o* is *F*. But now add, to our description of this subject, that he is wondering to himself whether *o* is *F*. Such a subject will now satisfy (i) as well as (ii), but still will not have judged that *o* is *F*.

So, what do we have to add to (i) and (ii) to gain an account of judgment? Soames says that we must require that the subject's satisfying (i) must 'involve' his satisfying (ii). That is, for an agent to judge a proposition, it is not enough for an agent to individually satisfy the two conditions; rather, the way in which the agent satisfies the two conditions must be unified in some way. But now it is clear that we face a version of the sort of question that was so difficult for the complex-act theorist to answer: what does it take for a subject's satisfying (i) to involve, in the relevant sense, her satisfying (ii)?

Just the same sorts of answers that we examined above suggest themselves here. For example, one might appeal to intentional relations of some sort. Perhaps, for example, we could require that the subject recognise that the relevant dispositions are connected in some way to the act of predication. But this would run into just the kinds of problems faced by intentional complex-act theories that we discussed in section 3.2. First, it would involve just the kind of over-intellectualisation of judgment that Soames's account was meant to avoid. Second, it leads immediately to a vicious regress, since the relevant act of recognition would itself seem to be either a judgment or another sort of occurrent propositional attitude, and hence would itself require the kind of explanation in which it figures.

One might instead appeal to broadly causal relations, and say that the act of predication must be a cause of the formation or activation of the relevant dispositions. But then we would face a version of the problem that we raised in section 3.3 for causal theories of complex acts. I might wonder whether *o* is *F* (thus performing the act of predication and satisfying (i)), and this act of wondering might cause me to activate certain dispositions, thus causing me to satisfy (ii). But I still might not judge that *o* is *F*. This would be the analogue of the kind of 'deviant causal' cases discussed above.

The simple-act theorist might try to solve these problems by adopting a different view of predication than Soames offers, and instead follow Hanks [2015: 91] in thinking of predication as ‘judgmental or assertoric in character’.¹⁵ This would solve the problem of giving an account of judgment, by removing the need for any special account: judgment could just be identified with the performance of the relevant act of predication.

But while this would give the simple-act theorist temporary relief, I think that it would only be temporary. That is because judgment is just one of many occurrent propositional attitudes. If we turn to some other occurrent propositional attitude relation *R*, it’s hard to see how we could avoid being forced to say that to stand in *R* to an act of predication is to perform the predication and to satisfy some second condition. If, as seems reasonable, we want to avoid requiring the subject of the attitude to predicate properties of her own cognitive acts, it is hard to see how that second condition could be very different to Soames’s. And if that is right, then it looks like the problems that face Soames’s account of judgment will simply appear in a new form.

5. Conclusion

A number of philosophers have recently noted that ‘the problem of the unity of the proposition’ is better thought of as a cluster of interrelated problems.¹⁶ My aim in this paper has been to show that one such problem arises in a way that has not been noticed for the theory that propositions are complex cognitive acts. The problem can be solved by scaling back the ambitions of the act theory of propositions, and by opting for the view that propositions are simple rather than complex acts. But even if this retreat is made, the problem of the unity of the proposition re-appears for the act theorist as a problem about the unity of judgment and other propositional attitude states.¹⁷

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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¹⁵ I should add that the reasons why Hanks adopts a view of this sort have nothing to do with the kind of issue under discussion here; rather, they come from scepticism about a certain kind of content-force distinction.

¹⁶ See, for example, King [2009].

¹⁷ Thanks for very helpful comments on previous versions of this material to Peter Hanks, Lorraine Keller, Gideon Rosen, Scott Soames, audiences at the University of Leeds and USC, the participants in Boris Kment’s and Shamik Dasgupta’s graduate seminar at Princeton, and two anonymous referees.

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