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Are Propositions Essentially Representational?

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Abstract: King (2007, 2009, 2012) argues that nothing has truth conditions except by being taken to be true or false by rational agents. But—for good reason—King claims that propositions possess truth conditions essentially and intrinsically. I will argue that King cannot have both: if the truth conditions of a proposition depend on the reactions of rational agents, then the possession of truth conditions can't follow from the intrinsic nature or existence of the proposition. This leaves two options. Either, nothing can do the job that motivates positing propositions. Or, there is no need to explain what bestows a truth condition on a proposition.

Propositions play a number of important roles in our theories. Among other things, they are meant to be the objects of attitudes, the semantic contents of sentences in context, and the primary truth bearers. One feature common to many of these roles is that propositions are meant to be pieces of *information*. To interpret a belief state or a sentence is to determine what information is carried by the state or expressed by the sentence. The *truth conditions* of the belief state or sentence vary with the piece of information carried. If propositions are pieces of information, then their truth conditions are not so variable. The truth-value of a proposition directly depends on the world. Let us say that on the traditional conception of propositions, they have truth conditions *essentially* and *intrinsically*. Namely, a proposition's existence necessitates its having its truth conditions and any duplicate of a proposition must have the same truth conditions.

But how can an entity be *essentially* and *intrinsically* representational? On the traditional view, a proposition also has its truth conditions *inherently*: the truth conditions of a proposition are bestowed by its very nature and not by anything outside of it.¹ In a series of works, King (2007, 2009, 2012, 2014a,b) has been sharply critical of this sort of approach: ‘no one has ever been able to explain how *anything* could have truth conditions by its very nature and independently of minds and languages’ (2014a: 47).

Yet, King (2007: 60-1; 2012; 2014b: 186) is explicit that he wants an account on which propositions have truth conditions *essentially* and *intrinsically*. Attempting to thread the needle, he holds that propositions have truth conditions *essentially* and *intrinsically*, but not *inherently*.

[O]n my account the representational capacity of propositions is derived from something outside them. But [...] having the truth conditions it has is an intrinsic (and essential) property of a proposition. (King 2007: 131)

If King could make good on this promise, then he would have a compelling account of propositions.

I show that this combination is untenable. Propositions, as King assays them, have their truth conditions neither essentially nor intrinsically. To repair the proposal, one must hold that there is an inexplicable necessary connection forcing agents to interpret the proposition or that rational agents have a self-referential attitude. The first view seems to return to the traditional conception that propositions have their truth conditions inherently. The second view is implausible. The failure of King’s attempt leaves two options. Either, nothing can do the job that motivates positing

propositions. Or, King's seemingly formidable problem is in fact a pseudo-problem: there is no need to explain what bestows a truth condition on a proposition.²

I. Propositions as Essentially Representational

In this section, I outline the conception of propositions as pieces of information. My aim is to make plausible the idea that in order to perform their function, propositions have their truth conditions essentially. As I have mentioned, King argues that propositions have their truth conditions essentially and intrinsically. The intrinsically of truth conditions is an interesting thesis, and I argue in §V that this intrinsicality also conflicts with the view that the possession of truth conditions is not *inherent*. But, my focus will be on the essentiality of truth conditions.

It is most natural to bring this essentiality out by contrasting propositions with sentences. The truth of a sentence such as (J) 'Mario jumps' results partly from the state of the world. Given that (J) conveys the information that Mario jumps, it is true *if and only if* he jumps. It is false if he fails to jump. Yet, the sentence might have conveyed different information. The sentence would then have had different *truth conditions*. For instance, the meanings of its vocabulary might have been different. Had speakers used 'Mario' differently—referring to, say, Luigi—then (J) would have expressed the information that Luigi jumps. (J) would have been true *iff* Luigi jumps.

The truth conditions of a sentence depend on human activities in subtler ways. King (2007) argues that the meanings of the expressions in a sentence fail to fix its truth conditions. Grant that 'Mario' refers to *Mario* and 'jumps' expresses *the property of jumping*. The truth conditions of sentence (J) are still open because the semantic significance of *concatenation*, which relates these expressions to form a sentence, has not been specified. English speakers take a sentence that results from subject-predicate

concatenation to express the information that the subject term *instantiates* the property expressed by the predicate. King (2007: 35; 2009: 261) imagines speakers who take such sentences to express the information that the referent of the subject term *fails* to instantiate the property expressed by the predicate. Construed as a sentence of that language, (J) would be true *iff* Mario doesn't jump. Concatenation means what it does in English because 'when English speakers confront other cases of syntactically concatenated expressions, they spontaneously and unreflectively compose the semantic values of the concatenated expressions in characteristic ways' (King 2012: 4).³

According to an influential tradition, the information conveyed by a sentence is a *proposition*. King (2007: 1-2) says in motivating the view that there are *propositions*:

What piece of information a sentence encodes [...] together with the way the world is determine whether it is true or false. If propositions exist, we can identify them with these pieces of information and make sense of this.

Sentences express propositions [...] and propositions are true or false depending on how the world is.

While the truth-value of a sentence depends on both convention and the world, the truth-value of a proposition depends on the world straightaway. Propositions are not double-indexed—as it were—so that the world determines both under what conditions they are true and whether those conditions obtain.

As King says, once the information expressed by a sentence is fixed, the state of the world determines the sentence's truth-value. Once the information is specified, the truth conditions are thereby specified as well. A natural picture, then, is that the *piece of information* has its truth conditions essentially. If propositions are identical to pieces of information, then they should have their truth conditions essentially as well.

Speaks (2014: 150ff) offers further considerations in favor of the view that propositions have their truth conditions essentially. The argument proceeds from considering the unnaturalness of assertions such as (J*):⁴

(J*) It is possible that the proposition that Mario jumps exists and is not true even though Mario jumps.

If we accept that pieces of information have their truth conditions essentially and that propositions are pieces of information, then it is possible to explain why sentences such as (J*) seem infelicitous. At any rate, it is a *desideratum* for any successful theory of propositions that it preserve the essential and intrinsic connection between propositions and their truth conditions.

II. King's Objection to the Traditional View

According to the traditional conception, propositions represent the world by their natures. As King says, these traditional views portray representation—the possession of truth conditions—as an *inherent* property of propositions, not due to anything outside of them. King (2007: 32-3, footnote 13; 2009: 259-60; 2012) argues that the traditional view faces a formidable explanatory challenge: how can anything have truth conditions *inherently*?

In this section, I develop King's objections, which issue from the thought that nothing can have truth conditions unless *it is taken to have truth conditions by rational agents*. Or weaker, nothing can have truth conditions unless rational agents are disposed to take it as having truth conditions. So as I develop King's objection, I want to establish that he is committed to something like the following thesis:

Necessarily: (x has truth conditions only if agents are disposed to take x as having truth conditions).

I will elaborate King's objections as directed against traditional versions of possible world views of propositions, structured complex views, and the sort of attitude based account recently developed by Soames. In all of these cases, he objects that the target entities to be identified with propositions cannot have truth conditions independently of the dispositions of rational agents. When King attacks the sort of account developed by Soames, he is more explicit. The dispositions must be to take the target entities (rather than suitably related entities) as true or false.

Some traditional theorists would say that propositions are *sets of possible worlds* (Stalnaker 1970/1999: 32-3). These theorists might hold that it follows from the description of a proposition as a set of worlds that it is true if the actual world is a member of it and false otherwise. But King (2012: §3) points out that one could take either a set of worlds or its complement to represent the truth conditions of a single sentence.⁵ One might take the set of worlds in which Mario jumps to be represented by the sentence 'Mario does not jump'. Thus, sets of worlds don't determine truth conditions except by being subject to certain interpretive conventions. And King is doubtful that non-philosophers actually engage in interpreting sets of worlds.

Others say that propositions are structured wholes composed either of objects and properties such as Mario and jumping or of proxies for these objects and properties.⁶ These theorists often say that propositions thereby inherently represent the objects as instantiating the properties. Thus, 'Mario jumps' expresses the proposition that Mario jumps, which intrinsically is true just in case Mario jumps. King points out that many structured complexes (sets and ordinary mereological sums) lack truth conditions. He seeks an explanation of why the target structured complexes have truth conditions. For the most part, he can't find one that doesn't appeal to the interpretive dispositions of rational agents.

King also criticizes Soames (2010), whom he reads as arguing that propositions are mental state types, which inherit their truth conditions from mental state tokens with inherent representational properties. King objects on both fronts. First, King (2012: 90) objects ‘that the event tokens [...] inherently have truth conditions is just mysterious. I can see how event tokens could have truth conditions in virtue of agents interpreting them in certain ways. But how could an event token inherently have truth conditions?’ Here, we see again King claiming that one can explain how something—a mental state token—can have truth conditions if agents interpret *it*, but cannot have truth conditions inherently. And he does not seem to see fit to look for any alternative, that they have truth conditions in some other way. But King also objects to the inheritance principle, that propositions have truth conditions in virtue of their ‘intrinsic connection’ with event *tokens* [...] which inherently have truth conditions.” King objects (2012: 90) ‘even if we were to grant that [the tokens] did [inherently have truth conditions], why would this insure that the event type of which they are tokens has truth conditions?’ I shall revisit whether King himself can make use of related inheritance principles in §VIII.

In all of these arguments, King seems to take his explanatory demand to establish that an entity has truth conditions only if agents are disposed to take *it* as having truth conditions. This claim seemingly underwrites King’s argument against both the traditional conception of propositions and against attitude-based accounts. As King (2009: 261) says,

[A]ny [view] according to which propositions represent things as being a certain way and so have truth conditions in virtue of their very natures and independently of minds and languages is in the end completely mysterious and so unacceptable. But then it seems that the answer to [the question of why

propositions have truth conditions] must have to do with something about us.

[...] [I]t is something we speakers of languages do that results in propositions representing things as being a certain way and so having truth conditions.

Thus, King thinks that propositions have truth conditions in virtue of ‘something we speakers of language do’. And this seems to be establishing interpretive conventions that dispose us to take the proposition as true or false under appropriate conditions.

III. The Difficulty

We have seen that King is committed to two theses. First, he is committed to the view that propositions such as the proposition expressed by (J) have their truth conditions essentially. So the proposition that Mario jumps could not exist unless it is true just in case Mario jumps. Second, propositions have their truth conditions due to the dispositions and conventions of rational agents to take them as having truth conditions.

These two claims create a *prima facie* difficulty for any account of propositions. For it seems contingent that human beings take the entities to be identified with propositions and not some other entities to have the relevant representational properties. Just as there might be beings who respond to sentence (J) by supposing that Luigi jumps, it seems as though there might be beings who relate to any given entities to be identified with propositions differently than we do. It is conceivable that a suitably disposed community might signal the entity to be identified with the proposition that Mario jumps in order to communicate that Mario doesn’t jump. This community might endow the relevant fact with a different representational significance.

The *prima facie* difficulty is related to, but distinct from, an objection to King’s account of propositions developed by Speaks (2014: 153-154). Speaks worries that if

propositions have their truth conditions essentially, then speakers can do nothing to bestow truth conditions on them. All that speakers can do is make them exist or not.

Speaks takes as a premise that if an entity has a property essentially, then its possession of that property cannot be explained by anything outside of it. I do not share that presupposition. Suppose that propositions were essentially attractive so that if they exist then—by necessity—they attract speakers to take them as having truth conditions. The fact that agents are disposed to take them as having truth conditions might then explain why the proposition has truth conditions. The disposition would in turn be explained by the intrinsic attraction.

The *prima facie* difficulty is different. If propositions have truth conditions essentially but cannot have truth conditions unless rational agents are disposed to take them to be true or false, then propositions cannot exist unless rational agents are so disposed. But this means that propositions are *essentially attractive* in the sense described above. And it is peculiar that any entity could have this sort of essential attractiveness.⁷ More to the point, this essential attractiveness demands explanation just as much as the possession of truth conditions does. It is no advance to explain the possession of truth conditions in terms of the dispositions of rational agents, if one posits an unexplained necessary connection requiring rational agents to take propositions as having truth conditions.

King's account, as I understand it, is meant to explain why a proposition cannot exist without being interpreted by rational agents. According to King, the existence of a proposition is tied up with the fact that speakers engage in interpretation. That is, the proposition could not exist unless speakers interpreted certain entities as having truth conditions. We shall see that King develops two strategies which attempt to use this interpretation-dependence in order to guarantee that propositions themselves have

truth conditions essentially. I will argue that neither of these strategies overcomes the *prima facie* difficulty. As a result, King has not succeeded in developing an account of propositions according to which they are essentially representational and have their possession of truth conditions explained by the dispositions of rational agents.

IV. King's Account

In this section, I develop the bare bones of King's account of what propositions are. In the following sections, I will explain why King thinks that propositions are essentially interpreted.

On King's account, a proposition is a *fact*, the exemplification of a property by a particular. Of course, the proposition that Mario jumps cannot be the fact that Mario jumps, the exemplification of the property of jumping by Mario, since the proposition that Mario jumps, but not the fact, can exist even while Mario is not jumping.

So which fact is the proposition that Mario jumps? Following Wittgenstein (1922/2005: 3.14), King argues that a sentence is a fact. Thus, (J) 'Mario jumps' consists in the words 'Mario' and 'jumps' standing in the relation of subject-predicate concatenation which King calls the *sentential relation, R*. (J) is also a poor candidate to be the proposition. This is partially because speakers of different languages can express the proposition that Mario jumps, but they do not engage with the sentence 'Mario jumps'.

More importantly, (J) does not have representational properties essentially. I mentioned above that speakers might have used the name 'Mario' differently, which would lead to the sentence having different truth conditions. Similarly, had speakers used the predicate 'jumps' differently, it would have expressed a different property with

corresponding implications for the truth conditions of (J). Or, again, they might have interpreted concatenation differently.

To remedy these problems, King seeks to exhibit a fact which has truth conditions essentially and intrinsically and which can be shared by speakers of different languages. The fact he offers is related to the fact that 'Mario' and 'jumps' stand in sentential relation R . First, King collects up the various representational properties of this sentence into a single conjunctive fact, including the fact that the name 'Mario' refers to Mario, the predicate 'jumps' expresses the property of jumping, and the fact that the sentential relation R encodes instantiation. Call this P(ropositional)-Fact 1.

P-Fact1: R ('Mario','jumps') & 'Mario' refers to *Mario* & 'jumps' expresses *the property of jumping* & R encodes instantiation

P-Fact1 is not the proposition that Mario jumps. It may be common for speakers of English to consider this fact when considering the proposition that Mario jumps. But monolingual German speakers don't.

Thus, King moves to P-Fact2 which existentially generalizes on the specific expressions.

P-Fact2: $\exists n \exists p (R(n,p) \text{ \& } n \text{ refers to } \textit{Mario} \text{ \& } p \text{ expresses } \textit{the property of jumping} \text{ \& } R \text{ encodes instantiation})$

P-Fact2 exists *iff* there is a subject and predicate that make a sentence, where the subject refers to Mario, the predicate expresses the property of jumping, and the sentence-forming relation encodes instantiation. King (2009: 270-1) suggests that speakers of different languages have access to P-Fact2 when they make use of sentences synonymous with 'Mario jumps'. Thus, P-Fact2 is well suited to be the kind of meaning that is common to all sentences synonymous with 'Mario jumps' and to be the object of the attitude expressed by this sentence.⁸

V. The *Prima Facie* Difficulty Applied to King's View

The existence of P-Fact2 requires that speakers do some interpreting. In order for P-Fact2 to exist speakers must interpret a sentence. Yet, King's account—described thus far—does not say that speakers take P-Fact2 itself to have truth conditions. For this reason, nothing said so far guarantees that F-Fact2 has truth conditions at all, much less that it has them essentially. As King (2009: 264) emphasizes, 'there is no reason to think that [P-Fact2] has truth conditions and so is either true or false.' The existence of P-Fact2 guarantees that the existence of a sentence that is true just in case Mario jumps. But for P-Fact2 to have truth conditions— King believes—speakers must be disposed to take P-Fact2 itself as true under given circumstances. And, without further discussion, there could be creatures wholly indifferent to P-Fact2.

I take the fact that it is *conceivable* that speakers are indifferent to P-Fact2 to create a very strong presumption in favor of its being possible. King is in no position to posit an unexplained necessary connection mandating that speakers interpret P-Fact2 in a certain way. If the necessary connection is not *explained*, then proponents of traditional conceptions of propositions as inherently representational could retort that on their own view, the representational capacities of propositions arise because rational agents necessarily interpret the propositions as having truth conditions, though this necessary connection cannot be explained.

This impression of contingency is also supported by King's own discussion. King (2007: 61; 2009: 266-7) tells a *just-so story* according to which the sentential relation *R* is taken to ascribe instantiation, but agents as yet have no reaction to the proposition. They then introduce 'that'-clauses whose most eligible referents are facts such as P-

Fact2, which they ‘without thinking and implicitly’ (2009: 267) take to be true if the corresponding sentences are true.

King does not intend this story to be literally true. That is, he does not believe that the interpretation of the sentence occurs temporally prior to the interpretation of the proposition. Rather, the temporal priority of the just-so story is meant to make plausible the idea that the interpretation of the sentence is *explanatorily* prior to the interpretation of a proposition.⁹

Even if the *just-so* story is not meant to be actually true, it does seem *possibly true*. Indeed, it would be strange for King to illustrate how his view is supposed to work by describing a case that he himself believes is impossible. But if the *just-so* story is possibly true, then it is possible for P-Fact2 to exist without being taken to have truth conditions and—therefore—without having them.

As King has set things up, in order for P-Fact2 to have truth conditions, it does not suffice that speakers merely take sentence (J) as having truth conditions. They must take P-Fact2 itself to have truth conditions. I take this to reflect the principle above that in order for something to have truth conditions, agents must be disposed to take *it* as having truth conditions. But we’ve seen that there is a strong presumption that it is possible that P-Fact2 exist, but speakers *fail* to take any attitude at all towards P-Fact2. King’s own *just-so* story illustrates the conceivability of such a state-of-affairs. And absent some further story about why speakers *must* be disposed to take P-Fact2 as having truth conditions given that it exists, we should be wary of positing that they must be so disposed. More explicitly, the argument may be formulated as follows.

- (1) Necessarily: (x has truth conditions only if agents are disposed to take x as having truth conditions).

- (2) The proposition that Mario jumps is identical to P-Fact2, the fact that agents take some sentence, subject term of which denotes Mario and predicate term expresses jumping and whose concatenation relation encodes instantiation.
- (3) It is possible that P-Fact2 exists because there is a sentence whose subject term denotes Mario and predicate term expresses jumping and whose concatenation relation encodes instantiation without speakers taking P-Fact2 to have truth conditions. (By the default presumption and the possibility of King's *just-so* story.)
- (4) In any world in which there is a sentence whose subject term denotes Mario and predicate term expresses jumping and whose concatenation relation encodes instantiation, a duplicate of P-Fact2 exists.¹⁰
- (5) Therefore, it is possible for the proposition that Mario jumps to exist without having truth conditions. (By 1 and 3)
- (6) Therefore, it is possible for a duplicate of the proposition that Mario jumps to exist without having truth conditions. (By 1 and 4)

The argument establishes that the proposition that Mario jumps has truth conditions neither essentially (by 5) nor intrinsically (by 6).

The weakest point of the argument is (3). It rests on the default presumption that an agent could interpret a sentence without interpreting the proposition it expresses. The presupposition against positing unexplained necessary connections requiring speakers to interpret things seems to be a very deep feature of King's view. The conceivability of the *just-so* story reinforces the need for King to say something more to ensure that speakers not only do interpret P-Fact2, but that they *must interpret it* if it exists. If King could explain why there is a necessary connection guaranteeing that

speakers interpret the proposition that Mario jumps, if it exists, then he could resist premise (3).

I will examine two independent strategies that King develops which might seem to deliver such an explanation. One strategy involves going into detail about how speakers interpret the sentential relation. On this account, speakers *cannot* interpret the sentential relation without also interpreting the proposition. The other strategy involves identifying the proposition that Mario jumps not with P-Fact2, but with the “slightly larger” fact that P-Fact2 is interpreted. I will argue that neither strategy can explain why the proposition that Mario jumps is essentially such that it is interpreted by rational agents as having truth conditions.

VI. Interpreting the Sentential Relation

The existence of P-Fact2 guarantees that sentence (J) exists and is interpreted as being true just in case Mario jumps. In recent work, King has tried to tell an explicit story about how agents who interpret (J) are in a position to access and interpret P-Fact2 as well. Speaks (2014: 152, footnote 5) suggests that the interpretation of (J) is ‘metaphysically sufficient’ for the interpretation of P-Fact2. In particular, he suggests that interpreting the sentential relation of subject-predicate concatenation in (J) necessarily entails interpreting P-Fact2. King (2014b: 187, footnote 3) seems to agree on this front. In this section, I examine King’s explicit story about how agents go from interpreting the sentential relation to interpreting the proposition itself. I argue that—despite some appearance to the contrary—there is no reason to think that interpreting the sentential relation *metaphysically suffices* for interpreting the propositional relation.

One might have thought that the sentence (J) is interpreted as having truth conditions as follows. Speakers confront a sentence such as (J) which contains a subject

term referring to Mario and a predicate term expressing jumping. While having (J) in mind, the speakers interpret the sentence as being true just in case Mario *instantiates* jumping, and they are similarly disposed for any sentence exhibiting the same syntactic relation.

This is not King's view, however. On King's view, speakers manifest their disposition to interpret (J) as having truth conditions in a different way. When they confront (J), speakers are inclined to abstract from the specific lexical items. That is, King (197ff) thinks that if one entertains the fact that 'Mario' refers to Mario, 'jumps' expresses jumping, and 'Mario', and 'jumping' stand in R, then 'one is thereby in a position' to have in mind the fact that there is a name referring to Mario, there is a predicate that expresses jumping, and the name and the predicate stand in a relation that encodes instantiation. The speaker is thereby able to have P-Fact2 'in mind' in order to interpret it. As King (2014b: 198) says,

Not only does it seem plausible that one is able to abstract from features of a witness fact in this way, thereby having the fact it witnesses in mind, but it also seems plausible that we do this in moving from having a sentence in mind to interpreting the propositional relation of the sentence expressed by the sentence and thus understanding the sentence.

So King's view is that speakers who interpret (J) also *are in a position to* have P-Fact2 in mind. Indeed, King thinks that they actually do have P-Fact2 in mind.

On King's view, it is only *after* the speakers have P-Fact2 in mind that they interpret (J). As King (2014a: 55) describes the process of interpreting a sentence such as (J):

Semantic values only get composed once in understanding the sentence [(J)], and hence entertaining the proposition [P-Fact2].

In particular, speakers first perform the abstraction described above.

Only now are the semantic values composed, and so the semantic significance of the sentential relation of ['Mario jumps'] is now cashed in. Thereby, the property of [jumping] is ascribed to [Mario]. However, since it is the fact that is the proposition that [Mario jumps] that we have in mind when semantic values are composed, we count as interpreting its propositional relation as ascribing the property of [jumping] to [Mario]. So interpreting the sentential relation in the way we do, by composing semantic values in a certain way at a certain point in the process just described, *just is* interpreting the propositional relation in the relevant way. (King 2014b: 200)

If all that King says is right, then rational agents cannot interpret the sentence (J) in precisely the way that *actual* rational agents interpret (J) without thereby interpreting P-Fact2 as having the same truth conditions as (J).¹¹ This account, particularly the claim that interpreting the sentential relation in (J) 'just is' interpreting P-Fact2, might suggest that P-Fact2 is essentially such that agents interpret it, if it exists.

For the sake of argument, I grant that entertaining a fact *can put one in a position* to entertain its existential generalization. In particular, I grant that entertaining the interpreted sentence *puts one in a position* to entertain P-Fact2. Notice, however, the language of permissions, potentials, and possibilities in these formulations. The formulations do not at all suggest that an agent who has a fact such as (J) in mind *must* have its existential generalization in mind.

Moreover, I grant that the claim that *actual rational agents* do interpret (J) in the way described. What is missing, however, is any reason to think that speakers *must* take (J) as having truth conditions by first accessing P-Fact2. Suppose that King has indeed established that all actual event tokens that fall under the type *interpreting sentence (J)*

also fall under the type *interpreting P-Fact2*. That is, suppose that King has established that speakers who interpret sentence (J) also interpret P-Fact2. Then, King will have established a sense in which interpreting sentence (J) *just is* interpreting P-Fact2. But we must not be misled into thinking that it follows from that that *necessarily* any time (J) is interpreted, P-Fact2 is also interpreted.

For a comparison, it may be the case that every time one flips a switch a light turns on. There would then be a sense in which flipping the switch *just is* turning on the light. In particular, they are the same event token. But that does not mean that *necessarily* any flip-switching event is also a light-turning-on event. So I take it that the fact that speakers *actually manifest their disposition to interpret (J) by thinking of P-Fact2* does not give us any reason to think that necessarily any agent who interprets (J) thereby interprets P-Fact2. It therefore does not explain why P-Fact2 is interpreted whenever it exists.

Indeed, if King's notion of *having P-Fact2 in mind* is meant to be realistically psychologically implemented, it's hard to see why it would be necessary that anyone who thinks of (J) thereby also thinks of its existential generalization, even if in a position to do so. That is, King seemingly means that when agents interpret sentence (J), there is a genuine psychological process of generalizing to P-Fact2 and it is only after this process is completed that speakers compose the semantic values of the terminal nodes of (J). If this is right, it is hard to see how this *auxiliary* process could be necessarily involved in composing the terminal nodes of the sentence.

On the other hand, King might deny there is a genuine auxiliary process going on inside the speaker. There is nothing psychologically or real other than the interpretation of (J). It's just that any speaker who interprets the sentence (J) also 'counts as' interpreting its existential generalization P-Fact2, and does so *of necessity*.

Such a view, however, seems to re-introduce the idea that there is simply a necessary connection forcing any rational agent who interprets the sentential relation to interpret the proposition. The fact that the existence of P-Fact2 guarantees that speakers have interpreted sentence (J), therefore, seems to offer no reason to suppose that it is a necessary truth that speakers are disposed to interpret P-Fact2, if it exists. It therefore offers no reason to believe that P-Fact2 has its truth conditions essentially or intrinsically.

VII. Enlarging The Proposition

King (2007: 60; 2012: 81) offers a different account of why the proposition that Mario jumps has truth conditions *essentially*. This account involves rejecting the view that the proposition that Mario jumps is identical to P-Fact2.

P-Fact2: $\exists n \exists p (R(n,p) \ \& \ n \text{ refers to } \textit{Mario} \ \& \ p \text{ expresses } \textit{the property of jumping} \ \& \ R \text{ encodes instantiation})$

King considers the relationship between *Mario* and *the property of jumping* in P-Fact2.

He calls this the *propositional relation* (PR):

(PR): $PR(x,y) =_{def} \exists n \exists p (R(n,p) \ \& \ n \text{ refers to } x \ \& \ p \text{ expresses } y \ \& \ R \text{ encodes instantiation})$

King argues that the proposition that Mario jumps has truth conditions only if the propositional relation *encodes* instantiation. This, again, derives from a contingent fact about human beings. King (2007: 60) says, ‘What is the explanation for why the propositional relation [...] encodes the instantiation function? From the standpoint of the current view, certainly it must be something that we and our linguistic ancestors did.’

As we have seen, however, this guarantees that P-Fact2 has truth conditions but it does not guarantee that P-Fact2 has truth conditions *essentially*. P-Fact2 has truth conditions due to our contingent activities. As King (2012: 77) says, 'Encoding ascription understood in this way, note, is a relational property of the propositional relation itself[.]'

For this reason, King (2012: 77) points to an enlarged fact, which he now identifies with the proposition: 'let's understand the proposition that [Mario jumps] to be [P-Fact2], taken together with the propositional relation having the relational property of encoding ascription ([...]the fact that is the proposition that [Mario jumps] is a slightly "larger" fact than we have taken it to be to this point, since it now includes the propositional relation possessing a certain relational property).'¹² For King, the proposition that Mario jumps is the conjunctive fact (i) that Mario and jumping stand in the propositional relation and (ii) that the propositional relation encodes instantiation. I'll call this fact P-Fact3

P-Fact3: PR(*Mario, the property of jumping*) & PR encodes instantiation.

King (2012: 81) argues that identifying the proposition that Mario jumps with P-Fact3 guarantees that this proposition has its truth conditions *essentially*.¹³ Indeed, King (2007: 61ff) seems to move from the claim that the proposition is identical to P-Fact3 to the claim that the proposition has truth conditions essentially.

We now claim that the fact that is the proposition that [Mario jumps] includes the propositional relation possessing the property of encoding the instantiation function. This being so, having truth conditions, and having the particular truth conditions it has, is an intrinsic and essential property of the proposition that [Mario jumps].

I will now argue that this inference is invalid. The fact that the propositional relation PR encodes instantiation does not guarantee that the proposition that Mario jumps—that is, P-Fact3—has truth conditions.

Once again, P-Fact3 requires that what King calls the propositional relation, PR, encodes instantiation. But it is misleading to label PR the propositional relation. *An object and a property, say Mario and jumping, may stand in relation PR without the proposition that Mario jumps existing.* Mario and jumping stand in PR just in case P-Fact2 exists. And, P-Fact2 may exist without the proposition that Mario jumps existing. It is additionally needed that PR encodes instantiation. But this only guarantees that P-Fact3 exists, not that it has truth conditions. In order for the proposition that Mario jumps to exist—or, equivalently, for P-Fact3 to exist—Mario and the property of jumping must be related by a different relation from PR, say propositional relation*:

(PR*) $PR^*(x,y) =_{def} (PR(x,y) \ \& \ PR \text{ encodes instantiation})$

Given premise (1) above, that necessarily (x has truth conditions only if agents are disposed to take x as having truth conditions), it follows that the fact that PR encodes instantiation is not enough for P-Fact3 to have truth conditions. Rather, in order for P-Fact3 to have truth conditions, PR* must encode instantiation. And this is not guaranteed by the existence of P-Fact3. Parroting King, we may say, ‘there is no reason to think that [P-Fact3] has truth conditions and so is either true or false’, since there is no reason to think that speakers take PR* to encode instantiation.

This problem leads to a regress reminiscent of Bradley (1893/2002). If fact C1 is identified with the proposition that Mario jumps, then it is possible that C1 exists, but agents do not take it to have truth conditions. It would thus lack truth conditions. King responds that the proposition is not really C1, but C2: C1 together with the fact that agents take C1 to have truth conditions. But, once again, the existence of C2 cannot

guarantee that agents take it to have truth conditions. So we need a further fact, C3: C2 together with the fact that C2 has truth conditions. And so on.

VIII. Inheritance Principles

Before moving on, I will respond to a potential objection. One might hold that P-Fact3 inherits truth conditions from P-Fact2, because they stand in an intimate relationship. On such a view, in order for something to have truth conditions, agents don't need to be disposed to interpret *that very thing* as having truth conditions. Rather, an entity can inherit its truth conditions from something else that has them. So perhaps, King could argue that P-Fact3 is appropriately related to P-Fact2, which has truth conditions. Namely, P-Fact3 contains P-Fact2 as a constituent and P-Fact3 also contains the fact that P-Fact2 is interpreted. So maybe this is an appropriate relationship allowing P-Fact3 to inherit truth conditions from P-Fact2 without itself being interpreted.

I want to first note that I doubt that King himself actually endorses such inheritance principles, though it may be an improvement of the view he actually holds. As I mentioned above, King has already given reason—in his response to Soames (2010)—for questioning such inheritance principles. Soames believes that *belief tokens* (or tokens of some relevant attitude) have truth conditions and tries to generalize that certain entities appropriately related to them, namely *belief types*, have truth conditions. King, for the sake of argument, grants that the tokens have truth conditions. But he sees no reason to infer that belief types do. I don't see how King can freely pick and choose which inheritance relations are appropriate and which aren't.

More importantly, as I mentioned above, King (2009: 264) says that there is 'no reason' to think that P-Fact2 has truth conditions even though it is intimately related to the sentence (J) which has truth conditions. Indeed, the relationship between P-Fact2

and (J) is almost identical to the relationship between P-Fact3 and P-Fact2. Specifically, P-Fact2 is the result of conjoining the fact (J) with the fact that the sentential relation binding (J) together encodes instantiation and then existentially generalizing on the lexical items in (J). On the other hand, P-Fact3 is the result of conjoining P-Fact2 with the fact that the propositional relation encodes instantiation. These relations, it seems to me, are so close that *if King thought* that an entity could have truth conditions by being suitably related to an entity with truth conditions, then he would need to offer some reason why the relationship between P-Fact2 and (J) is not suitable for P-Fact2 to inherit its truth conditions from (J). As we have seen, King instead offers a complicated and speculative account according to which speakers who interpret (J) *thereby also* interpret P-Fact2 and so directly endow it with truth conditions.

The only difference of potential relevance between the relationship between P-Fact2 and (J) and the relationship between P-Fact3 and P-Fact2 is that P-Fact3 contains P-Fact2 as a constituent, while P-Fact2 does not contain (J) as a constituent, because it existentially generalizes on the nodes in (J). But King has already given reasons for questioning the relevance of constituency to representation. The Platonic conception of propositions as abstract structured wholes containing individuals and properties (and even instantiation) does not guarantee that the whole represents that the individuals instantiate the properties. More importantly, there are many facts that contain P-Fact2, but don't have truth conditions. The conjunction of P-Fact2 and the fact that Luigi runs contains P-Fact2, but lacks truth conditions. So why expect P-Fact3, but not this other fact, to inherit its truth conditions from its constituent?

Thus, given that King does not take (J) to bestow P-Fact2 with truth conditions merely in virtue of their intrinsic connection (but only in virtue of what we do), it would be baffling for him to then turn to say that P-Fact2 does indeed bestow P-Fact3 with

truth conditions regardless of whether agents take P-Fact3 to have truth conditions at all. The relationships are simply too close to make a difference to whether one fact could inherit its representational properties from another fact. And the relevant difference (constituency) does not automatically have representational import.

Regardless of whether this is King's actual view, is it an option for him? I don't believe so. King's whole approach is motivated by the claim that the traditional conception of propositions is *mysterious*. According to King, it is mysterious that propositions could have truth conditions that are not explained by interpretive activities of human beings. But it seems equally mysterious that interpreting one entity and so endowing it with truth conditions would automatically endow some other entity with truth conditions. Moreover, the relationships would have to be so highly specific that interpreting a sentence such as (J) *does not* result in endowing P-Fact2 with truth conditions, but interpreting P-Fact2 *does* result in endowing P-Fact3 with truth conditions. The inheritance would have to follow from the fact that P-Fact3 contains P-Fact2 as a constituent *and also* contains the fact that the propositional relation in P-Fact2 is interpreted. But, once again, there are many facts that contain exactly these constituents: for instance, the fact that conjoins (i) P-Fact2, (ii) the claim that PR encodes instantiations, and (iii) the fact that P-Fact2 is self-identical. Interestingly, what I have called P-Fact1 stands in the same relation to (J) that P-Fact3 stands in to P-Fact2. So embracing the current inheritance principle would problematically mandate that P-Fact1 has truth conditions, provided that (J) does. So, it seems as though the relevant inheritance principle would have to be even more refined. Thus, in order for P-Fact3 to inherit its truth conditions from P-Fact2, the inheritance would have to flow through idiosyncratic and highly specific channels. At very least, the principle allowing one

entity to inherit truth conditions for another would have to be gerrymandered to the extent that it is doubtful that it could be explanatory.

IX. Identification and Self-Reference

The argument above would be blocked if P-Fact2 is identical to P-Fact3. On this view, P-Fact3 —by guaranteeing that P-Fact2 has truth conditions—guarantees that P-Fact3 has truth conditions. This response also blocks the regress alluded to above. King wants to offer an object which (a) has truth conditions bestowed by rational agents and (b) has them intrinsically. In order for a target fact *C1* to have truth conditions, King believes that rational agents must take it to have truth conditions. Thus, he supposes that there is another fact *C2*, which is the fact that rational agents regard *C1* as having certain truth conditions. *C2* is then taken to be the proposition in question. But what bestows truth conditions on *C2*?

The regress is blocked because, at some stage, the fact *C1* is identical to the new fact *C2*, the fact that rational agents regard *C1* as having certain truth conditions. If this identification holds, then propositions have their truth conditions intrinsically. For, propositions would not be able to exist unless rational agents regarded them as having truth conditions

Unfortunately, the identification of P-Fact2 and P-Fact3 fails. If King's *just-so* story obtains, then P-Fact2 could exist without P-Fact3 existing. Thus, they cannot be identical. As Caplan and Tillman (2012: §5.1) note, King also says that P-Fact3 is "larger" than P-Fact2. This suggests that the operative conception of facts is one on which a conjunctive fact contains its conjuncts as *constituents*. P-Fact3 has a constituent lacked by P-Fact2. Namely, that PR encodes instantiation.

But this raises an interesting possibility. P-Fact3 requires that *Mario* and *the property of jumping* stand in the propositional relation PR and that PR encode instantiation. I objected that PR was defined as the relation that holds together P-Fact2. So this does not entail that the relation that holds together P-Fact3, PR*, is interpreted as encoding instantiation. Could King face this problem directly by defining a propositional relation, PR**, such that PR** must itself encode instantiation in order for *x* and *y* to stand in PR**?

(PR):** $PR^{**}(x,y) =_{def} (PR(x,y) \ \& \ PR^{**} \text{ encodes instantiation})$

Let P-Fact4 be the fact that *Mario* and *the property of jumping* stand in PR**. It would necessarily follow from the existence of P-Fact4 that speakers (are disposed to) take P-Fact4 to be true just in case Mario jumps. Thus, P-Fact4 essentially has the right truth conditions. This blocks the regress argument alluded to above.¹⁴ PR** occurs in its own definition. There is nothing inherently untoward about this, but it is bizarre to think that rational agents take PR** to encode anything. I submit that we rarely have such self-referential attitudes, and that there is no reason to make an exception for PR**.

X. Conclusion

King maintains that encoding instantiation is a relational property of the propositional relation. It depends on the dispositions of rational agents to interpret instances of the propositional relation as having truth conditions. It depends on “something we do” which is “outside” the proposition. To guarantee that propositions have truth conditions intrinsically and essentially, King sought to characterize an object the existence of which necessitates that speakers interpret it a certain way. But rational agents are notoriously fickle. And it is possible for them to be disposed to behave in myriad unwise and theoretically unwelcome ways. The very scenarios King describes so

eloquently—the possibility that they interpret the sentential relation differently or the possibility that they interpret structured complexes differently—testify to this fact. Simply put, there is no unproblematic entity that requires rational agents to have any particular reaction. We should be wary of any view that requires these reactions.¹⁵

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¹ This is also King's (2012: 89-90) expression.

² This argument, as far as I can tell, is new in the literature. But a hint can be found in Caplan and Tillman (2012: footnote 43). Speaks (2014: 153-154) also develops a related, but distinct objection.

³ King believes that English speakers lack conscious control over whether they interpret concatenation. It is a contingent biological and sociological fact that they do so. Yet, differently constituted agents may have done differently. And doing so, they would have bestowed different truth conditions on the sentence. Higginbotham (2008; 2009) also explores this issue.

⁴ Perhaps one might preserve the letter, if not the spirit, of the slogan that pieces of information depend only on the state of the world for their truth-values by holding that pieces of information are only contingently pieces of information. This would mean that *given that something is a piece of information*, its truth-value is determined solely by the state of the world, but the piece of information might have had different truth conditions or none whatsoever. Note, however, that it also seems strange to assert: 'the proposition that Mario jumps is such that it could exist without being true even though Mario jumps'.

⁵ Wittgenstein (1922/2005: 4.062) hints at this idea.

⁶ See the exchange between Frege and Russell in (Frege and Gabriel 1980: 163, 169). See Keller (2014) for criticism of structured complex accounts of propositions.

⁷ There is some relation between the *prima facie* difficulty and worries about moral judgment internalism, the view that judgments about moral properties are *pro tanto* motivating. See discussion in Foot (1972) and Mackie (1977/1990).

⁸ King refines his view to accommodate the presence of context sensitive expressions in English. This makes no difference to my discussion.

⁹ Soames (2010) interpreted King as committed to the literal temporal priority. See discussion in Soames (2014: 174ff).

¹⁰ I assume here that a fact just is the instantiation of a property by some objects. Thus, I assume that a proposition's intrinsic nature is given by enumerating these objects and their arrangements. What's most important, however, is that dispositions of rational agents to behave in certain ways toward the fact don't seem intrinsic in any traditional sense.

¹¹ Caplan and Tillman (2012: 6-7) also point out that King (2012: 10) thinks that it 'just isn't coherent' for speakers to interpret P-Fact2 as having different truth conditions than (J). They rightly respond that it is nonetheless possible. But their response can be

bolstered by consideration of the fact that what is coherent depends on mode of presentation. So, under a different mode of presentation—say a different coding system—speakers might with perfect coherence interpret P-Fact2 as having radically different truth conditions from (J).

¹² See also (King 2007: 60).

¹³ Similarly, King (2012, 81): ‘Propositions as I understand them have their truth conditions intrinsically: the fact that is the proposition that Michael swims includes its propositional relation having the relational property of encoding ascription. As such, any duplicate of this fact will have the same truth conditions it does and so the fact/proposition has its truth conditions intrinsically.’

¹⁴ For this account to work, PR** must uniquely specify a property. Otherwise, King must specify which property is the propositional relation. King could borrow from the work of Barwise and Etchemendy (1989) in which circular definitions can uniquely specify a proposition.

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