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## Arguments as Propositions that are a Kind of Act?

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**ABSTRACT:** Recent work on the nature of propositions has revived early 20th-century attempts to explain propositions in terms of acts. Hence, even if arguments are composed of propositions, if the propositions are in turn ultimately a kind of act, then arguments will be composed of acts. I shall argue however that such act accounts of propositions cannot support the current act-type theories of arguments and also offer challenges to act-based accounts of propositions.

**KEYWORDS:** abstract objects, act-type, argument, predication, proposition

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The three standard options for the constituents of arguments are propositions, acts, or linguistic or representational entities such as sentences or certain kinds of images. Most theorists hold, or at least implicitly act as if they hold, that arguments are repeatable. I can repeat Anselm's Ontological argument, say, by writing an expression of it on the board, and it still be Anselm's argument and not some new argument just created. But unlike propositions, acts and expressions, properly understood, are not repeatable. Hence, we apparently have a very simple argument that arguments are composed of propositions.

But, in fact, all that repeatability gets us is that arguments are some sort of object that can have multiple instances in time and space. So, while act-tokens or expression-tokens are neither abstract nor repeatable, act-types and expression-types are. Hence, we are back, very close, to where we started—the options for the constituents of arguments are propositions, act-types, or expression-types.

Given that all the options are abstract objects, part of me is tempted to just take the win on the following claims for which I have been arguing for years—whatever arguments are, they are abstract objects. Hence, we must be careful to distinguish the thing (the abstract object that is an argument) from any particular expression of it—the literal words on the page or the particular act that is, at a particular time and place, the arguing or the presenting of that thing. But I'm a philosopher, constitutionally compelled to find the truth, or understanding, or knowledge, or wisdom—whatever one takes to be the ultimate object of philosophy, and so I want to know *which* kind of abstract object arguments are.

Fine. In typical philosophical fashion, I'll start with what arguments are not. Arguments are not expression-types. Argument 1: Linguistic expressions are expressions in a particular language. If all the expression-tokens are expressions in a particular language, then the expression-type is also within a particular language. Arguments are translatable across languages, i.e., the same argument can be expressed in different languages. Hence, arguments are not expression-types. Argument 2: Even within a single

language, what argument is being expressed can depend on context in a way that is not true of expression-types. Different tokens of the expression:

(A) He just about scored a goal, so we can still win,

will express different arguments when uttered or written in the United States as opposed to the United Kingdom. But those tokens are of the same expression-type. Hence, arguments are not expression-types.

What of act-types? In earlier work, (2018, 2015), I have suggested, though never fully argued, that the relevant act-types are going to be expressed in terms of the content, i.e., being an uttering or presenting or whatever of a particular content, i.e., the propositions. But if the contents, the propositions, are doing all the work of delineating the relevant act-types, then we ought to just define the arguments in terms of the propositions. I am yet again not going to fill out this suggestion. Instead, I will explore a strategy that act-type theorists might adopt to attempt an end run around my suggestion that propositions are doing all the work.

Suppose you accept my suggestion that even for act-type theorists, propositions are doing all the work. Hence, we have made significant progress—the constituents of arguments are propositions. (Brief victory dance.) Unfortunately, the philosopher’s compulsion quickly kicks in again—so, what are propositions? And that is a hundred fifty plus year quagmire that I have been deliberately avoiding. As long as I can have some version of the standard notion that propositions are mind-independent abstract objects, then I can say what I want to say within argumentation theory. For example, such propositions, but not acts or expressions or expression-types, satisfy the following, uncontroversial claims about arguments and their constituents:

1. Arguments are repeatable.
  - 1a. The constituents of arguments are repeatable.
2. The same argument can be given in different languages.
  - 2a. The constituents of an argument can be given in different languages.
3. The same argument can be given in different ways within one language.
  - 3a. The constituents of an argument can be given in different ways within one language.
4. Arguments can have properties such as all the premises being true or the premises necessitating the conclusion, etc.
  - 4a. The constituents of arguments can, either singly or together, have properties such as ‘is true’, ‘is false’ ‘is necessary’, ‘is possible’ etc.

It turns out, however, that there is a non-standard view of propositions, one discussed around the same time as Frege’s and Russell’s views, but which resisted Bolzano’s sharp distinction between acts and contents, (Moltmann & Textor, 2017, p. vii), that might also satisfy these claims. At the time the view did not get much traction, but it has seen a more recent revival, viz. the view that propositions themselves are best construed as a type of act. Perhaps the act-type theorists will get the last laugh after all and I will have to retract my victory dance. The rest of this paper will be mostly devoted to presenting such a theory of propositions and discussing its ramifications for argumentation theory. Before

I do that however, I shall briefly discuss one act-based conception of propositions and discuss why it will not work.

## 2. ACT-TYPE VIEWS OF PROPOSITIONS

Kazimierz Twardowski, lecturing in the early 1900s, held that propositions are the products of acts of judging, asserting, etc., and last only as long as the acts themselves. (Twardowski, 1912/1999/2017, p. 90) Perhaps someone attracted to the view that arguments are the product of arguing would be similarly attracted to the view that the argument's constituents are themselves the products of acts such as judging, asserting, etc. Unfortunately, independently of repeatability issues for propositions (propositions only last as long as the act, so any new judging of P will produce a new proposition and by extension a new argument), on Twardowski's view there are no propositions that are unknowable or not entertainable, since the propositions themselves don't exist unless produced by some mental act.

Consider the following proposition:

(B) There exists a proposition about a number no thinker will ever consider that it is even.

(B), having been asserted by me, judged by you, etc. clearly exists on Twardowski's view. I maintain that in addition (B) is true. It's being true however requires the existence of a proposition of the form, n is even, which has never been thought of. But on Twardowski's view propositions that have never been thought of are impossible.

I am open to the possibility that (B) is false, but, if it is, it is contingently so—its falsehood depends on the cognitive capabilities of future or potential thinkers, which I am perhaps selling short. Or perhaps it is false because there is a being who is eternally thinking about everything, and so producing all propositions. But our philosophy of language should not by itself be generating an argument for the existence of God. On Twardowski's view, however, the proposition is necessarily false—no appeal to the potential cognitive abilities of thinkers is required—unconsidered propositions just do not exist.

If one grants my argument from (B) to the existence of propositions that no one has ever thought of, then I can add the following item to my list of things I can say about arguments and their constituents.

5a. The constituents of arguments can exist independently of anyone thinking of them.

I leave as an open question whether we should also add,

5. Arguments can exist independently of anyone thinking of them.

I maintain that 5 is also true, but Jeffrey Goodman (2018), for example, accepts 5a, but denies 5. We create arguments by thinking about groups of eternal, mind-independent, propositions in a particular way, Goodman says. Rebutting Goodman's view is a project

for another time, so I will withhold judgement about 5 here. I turn now to other act-type views of propositions.

Edmund Husserl held that propositions are properties, “the universal, the species of a particular feature present in all statements of the same sense.” (Moltmann & Textor, 2017, pp. x-xi) Put another way, propositions are the properties that certain acts (and possible acts) of judging, asserting, etc. all have in common. But other than saying that propositions are the ideal common species of certain acts, Husserl did not specify further what this common property was. If it turns out that the only such common property is something like, *expressing the proposition P*, then the propositions are grounding the property rather than the property constituting the proposition.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, Peter Hanks (2017), though he initially talks in terms of propositions as judgements and assertions, quickly defines judgments and assertions in terms of acts of predication. Similarly, Scott Soames claims, “the proposition that Socrates is human is the act of predicating humanity of Socrates.” (2017, p. 184) In other work, Soames holds that the predication need not be intentional, and so though he often talks in terms of cognitive acts, he also talks in terms of cognitive operations and cognitive events. For example, he writes: “the proposition that o is [P] is simply the minimal event type in which an arbitrary agent predicates [P] of o.” (2014, p. 96). Keeping Soames’ tendency to sometimes talk in terms of events or operations in mind, I shall however continue to explicate his theory in terms of acts. (My critical comments will not ultimately depend on this).

Predication act-types are repeatable. When I assert that Socrates is human and you judge that Socrates is human, part of what we do in common, according to Soames, is predicate humanity of Socrates. If I think Socrates is human in English and someone else thinks it in German, we still both predicate humanity of Socrates, so propositions can be given in different languages. Similarly, if I wonder whether Socrates is human and you claim that Plato’s teacher is human. Hence, 1a, 2a, and 3a all come out true on a Soames style cognitive act-type view of propositions.

According to Soames, a proposition, A is true at a world state w iff “whatever (namely o) [A] represents to be a certain way is that way ([P]) [at w]; is false [at w] iff o isn’t [P at w.]” (2014, p. 96) Necessity and entailment can now be defined in standard ways. Hence, Soames’ view makes 4a true. Note that for Soames, a proposition being true at a world state is not the same as a proposition being instantiated at a world state. No agent in a world may ever predicate P of o in that world, but if o is P in that world, then the proposition is still true in that world. This is but the first step in Soames’ account of making 5a come out true. I hold off now on the rest of the account, but see Problem #3 below, merely noting that Soames does want 5a (and I suspect 5) to come out true.

So here we have a non-standard account of propositions as cognitive act-types that looks like it could say what a standard mind-independent abstract object view of propositions can say about arguments. And if it can say all these things and do all the work we want of any theory of propositions, then, since I am already committed to there being act-types, I should, for reasons of ontological parsimony, prefer the act-type view of propositions (and arguments) to the more standard *sui generis* views. Before I explore

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<sup>1</sup> For other non-act-based conceptions of propositions as properties see, for example, Jeff Speaks (2014), (properties of everything), David Lewis (1979), (properties of possible worlds), Peter van Inwagen (2004) (0-place properties of nothing.)

whether such a view really can give us what we want, I shall briefly articulate how such a view would fit into the current state of theorizing about the nature of arguments.

### 3. RELATIONSHIP TO CURRENT ARGUMENTATION THEORY

Typical act or act-type accounts of arguments (and their constituents) appeal to speech acts. David Hitchcock (2021, 2017) has spent considerable effort developing, modifying, and defending such a view. At base, pragma-dialectics is grounded in such a view. But acts of predication are internal mental acts, whereas speech acts are external communicative acts. Hence, a Soames style cognitive act-type account of propositions would not vindicate any extant theory of arguments being composed of act-types. The act-types are just of different kinds.

One view of argument that is at least consistent with a Soames' style view of propositions is Dale Hample's argument<sub>0</sub>—argument-as-cognition. But Hample's argument<sub>0</sub> is a much broader notion than merely a certain set of a predication act-types—“these mental processes encompass everything involved in ‘thinking out’ an argument: the perceptual and inferential experience of noticing an argument or the need for one; the memorial processes of storage, retrieval, and reconstruction of pertinent cognitive elements; the information processing which is applied to the argument and its potential parts; the creative energies that generate new arguments or responses to them; and the productive abilities that give form to utterance.” (1985, p. 2). So, at best, the set of act- types of predication instantiated at a particular time by a particular agent would be a subset of the cognitive operations that Hample includes as part of argument<sub>0</sub>. (Maybe we could call this subset of predications the illative core of argument<sub>0</sub>?)

Despite the fact that no extant theory of arguments constructs them out of cognitive act-types, suppose one were to construct such a theory. Arguments (or perhaps simple arguments) are groups, collections, sets, whatever of propositions one of which is designated the conclusion. (Better: an argument is a set of a set (possibly empty) of propositions and another proposition.) Propositions are themselves cognitive act-types, namely predications of properties (of however many places) of things. So, the crucial questions for such a theory—what is the nature of predication? And can predication support a theory of arguments?

### 4. PROBLEMS FOR A PREDICATION THEORY OF PROPOSITIONS

Though Soames does take predication to be a primitive in his theory he does say some things about it. For example: “How we see things—the predications we make—is usually automatic, unconscious, and so better described as a kind of cognitive *operation* than as a species of *intentional action*. (2014b, p. 95, emphasis in original). Like Husserl, Soames identifies propositions in terms of what is common to various other acts or events—“all instances of the event types seeing *o* as red and imagining *o* as red—as well as instances of the types judging and asserting that *o* is red—are instances of the event type *cognizing o as red*, a.k.a *predicating redness of o*.”(2014a, p. 228, emphasis in original) But, he argues that this does not commit him to some mysterious act of bare predication out of

which these other acts are composed. “To see *o* as red is to predicate redness of *o* (i.e. to cognize of as red) *in a certain way*, while to visualize *o* as red is to predicate redness of *o* *in a different way*.” (2014a, p. 229, emphasis in original). He also says that to predicate redness of *o* is to represent *o* as being red. (2104b, p. 96) Indeed, I suspect predication is for Soames a fundamental kind of representation that agents perform that grounds non- agential representation.

I conclude with some potential challenges for a cognitive act-type theory of propositions and a theory of arguments grounded in such propositions.

#### 4.1 *Problem #1: Conflict with Ordinary Language*

Even though Soames has provided truth conditions for propositions, viz. a proposition, a cognitive act of representing, is true iff the world is the way the act represents it to be, it still seems odd to say that acts can be true or false. Some would even say it is a category mistake. The oddity goes the other way too. Propositions are act or event types, and since acts and events happen, instances of propositions must happen. For example, an instance of  $2+2=4$  is happening right now.

Soames admits that this is a cost of his theory, a cost he initially balked at, but has come to accept. First, he is not claiming that all acts or act-types have truth conditions, merely representational ones. Second, because “our task is theory construction—which in philosophy as well as empirical sciences can, when successful, usher in new, surprising and sometimes counterintuitive truths—ordinary-language style arguments that deny this ...have no .. force against the act view of propositions.”(2014a, p. 240). So yes, it is a surprising counterintuitive truth that some acts can be true or false and that propositions happen, just as it is a surprising counterintuitive truth that we cannot coherently hold all our commonplace beliefs about identity, change, and persistence simultaneously, or that a baseball is a layered lattice of mostly electron wave clouds grounded in, according to at least one current theory, one dimensional vibrating strings. (If you were to bombard the baseball with high energy photons, then some of the electron waves would act like particles and the baseball would seem like mostly empty space—obvious right?)

Regardless, the question remains whether any argumentation theorist is willing to construct a theory committed to holding that certain sorts of acts are true (or false) and that propositions happen.

#### 4.2 *Problem #2: Too Many Propositions*

Different acts of prediction will be different propositions. Consider:

(C) George is not tall.

A when confronted with that sentence does the following—predicates “non-tallness” of George. B does the following: predicates “tallness” of George, and then predicates “not-true” of the resulting proposition. So what exactly is the proposition that is the meaning of “George is not tall”? Soames actually gives *both* of these as possible ways of understanding sentences such as “George is not tall” saying that the former is available to cognitively primitive agents who may not have access to awareness of their own mental doings, i.e.

their own predications. (2014b, p. 98) Soames provides three ways to get “Romeo loves Juliet.” Soames also admits, that for even more complicated cases, he might have to define propositions not solely in terms of acts of predication, but also include operations on acts of predication. (2014b, p. 99) But as the complexity increases the number of ways an agent might “act out” what looks like just one proposition will also increase, and hence so will the actual number of propositions.

But one of the jobs that appeal to propositions is supposed to do is explain how your believing George is not tall and my wondering whether George is not tall and someone else asserting George is not tall in German all involve the *same* thing. But since I do not have access to any of your cognitive acts or operations, I cannot tell at all whether anyone else is in fact engaged in the same sort of act as I am when I judge that George is not tall.

Soames is aware of this problem, though he calls it minor (2014a, p. 238), and suggests a couple of ways he might initially try to solve it. One might admit that there are indeed multiple propositions, but then characterize “attitudes like judging, believing, and asserting in a way that guarantees that an agent who bears them to [any] of the ...propositions bears them to all.” (2014a, p. 238). So now a defender of Soames would have to provide a philosophy of mind that accomplished this task (and keep it consistent with Soames’ view that some agents are not aware of their own cognitive acts of predication, yet still have relations to propositions.)

Alternatively, he suggests we might identify the proposition with the disjunctive act type that is all the ways of generating what we take to be one proposition. (2014a, p. 238). Of course, we may not be able to specify in advance what all these ways are and we cannot specify the unknown ways as ways of generating the same proposition, since we are currently trying to identify the proposition itself. For example, is saying “it is not the case that both not A and (P and not P))” a way I can construct what you construct by saying A? If so, then propositions will have to be infinitary disjunctions of predications and operations on predications and hence most agents will have at best partial access to any proposition whatsoever.

#### 4.3 Problem #3: *Not enough propositions.*

Soames wants a naturalistic account, one ultimately grounded in concrete act tokens. As such, one might worry that he does not have the resources to generate all the propositions that we think there are. Here are the principles Soames provides for the generation of propositions.

(1) If an event type E has instances that exist, then E exists. (2014b, p. 101)

By itself (1) does not get us 5a.

(2) If R is an n-place property for which there have been events in which an agent predicates R of things and (ii)  $o_1, \dots, o_n$  are objects for each of which there have been events in which an agent thinks of or refers to it, then there exists a proposition p which is the (minimal) event type of targeting  $o_1, \dots, o_n$  and predicating R of them. (2014b, p. 102)

(2) does get us 5a, since even if there is no agent who has ever predicated say R of o, as long as some agent has predicated R of something and some agent has thought of o, then the predication type, predicating R of o, exists.

But one might worry that this is still not enough to get us the propositions that I said existed because of (B). After all, some of the numbers of which it is true that they are even, have never been thought of by any agent. Soames hints at the following to solve this problem:

The answer, I think, is that we have a systematic linguistic means—the numeral system—mastery of which allows us to directly designate each number. Appealing to this systematicity, we may plausibly extend the existence conditions given in [(1) and (2)] to allow for the existence of propositions entertainable by those who have mastered this or related systems. (2014a, p. 232)

In other words, Soames is suggesting some third sort of systematicity condition, which he does not explicitly provide.

Clearly Soames needs to provide more details about the systematicity condition, but at the very least the final formulation of the condition will have to avoid the following worries. First, does a systematic linguistic system really give us access to the properties or the objects, which are what is supposed to be being involved in the predication, or merely names and predicates, i.e. ways of referring to the properties and objects. But if access to a linguistic system of representations of objects and predicates is enough, then isn't the following enough to get me all possible propositions?

(D) I predicate everything (widest possible scope universal) of everything (widest possible scope universal)

Given access to the system of logic and its conventions, is (D) enough to generate the existence of all possible propositions? I suspect not—that just seems too easy. But if not, why not? Why is appealing to the numeral system okay, but, say, 2<sup>nd</sup>-order logic not okay for generating propositions no one has ever thought of?

Second, assuming logic is not a sufficient system for generating the existence of all possible propositions, it still seems we can point at propositions that are not generated by any of Soames three conditions. Soames himself gives the example of “for each molecule in the universe the proposition that it is a molecule exists and is true.”(2014b, p. 102). His solution to this problem is to accept that for many of these alleged propositions, they in fact, don't exist, but are nevertheless true.

Really??? Non-existent things with properties like ‘being true’!? Soames isn't saying the propositions are merely non-actual or merely possible—they do not exist at all— no instances in any world, no agent in any world thinking of that particular molecule (or else we are back to needing God again), and yet these non-existent propositions have the property of being true. I'd rather be a Platonist than accept non-existent things having properties.

Of course, if Soames did accept that mastery of certain logical systems was indeed enough to generate all possible propositions, then Problem #3 is solved. But if (D) is sufficient to generate all possible propositions, then Soames has a new problem.

#### 4.4 Problem #4: *Way, Way Too Many Propositions?*

Predicating something of something else is an action or operation that agents perform. Are there limits to what predications agents can perform? For example, can I predicate ‘is red’ of the action ‘swims’, to get ‘Swims is red?’ If so, then there is an act-type that is the predicating of red of ‘swims’, and so there is a proposition expressed here. Synesthetes can literally argue about the color of middle C or the taste of triangles. Given that perceptual experience is one of the ways in which agents represent X’s as Y’s, then there are such acts of representing and so such propositions on Soames’ account. What of “The slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe.” Did I just predicate slithy of toves, and then gyring and gimbaling in the wabe of slithy toves? If so, then we have a proposition. Can I predicate non-existence of things with all the puzzles doing so engenders?

If there are limits to what predications can be performed, then what are they. Perhaps Soames’ might try to claim that not all acts of predication instantiate propositions—but if so, how do I tell which predications are and which are not? But if there really are no limits, then (D) captures every single possible predication, and there are significantly more propositions than we thought.

If there are a lot more propositions than we thought, then there are a lot more arguments than we thought as well. Here’s one:

(E) The slivy toves did gyre and swims is red, so Dan is Harvey.

(Note that the ‘is’ in the conclusion is not the is of identity, but rather the predicative ‘is’, i.e., I am predicating Harvey of Dan—read it as something like Dan Harvies.). Even if you think some extra work needs to be done to make a set of a set of propositions and another proposition into an argument, whatever that extra work is, I did it for (E), so (E) is an argument. Even better, (E) is classically valid. It is not possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false—after all there are no world states in which the premises are true (and so though it is valid it is also necessarily not classically sound.)

If you are willing to accept (E), and all its brethren, as arguments, then problem #4 is not a problem for you. But if you are not, but still want to provide a cognitive act-type account of the constituents of arguments, then an account of what predications actually are possible or what predications actually count as propositions is owed.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Could propositions themselves be a type of cognitive act or operation? Yes. And if you think, as I do, that arguments are composed of propositions, then arguments could be composed of types of cognitive acts or operations. I have merely pointed out some of the challenges one has to overcome or consequences one must accept to adopt such a theory of propositions and arguments. Whether any argumentation theorist is going to adopt or defend such a theory remains to be seen. In the meantime, I am going to stick with my boring, traditional, abstract mind-independent eternal propositions and arguments.

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