

Propositional Attitudes?*

DRAFT – non-citable version

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I. What I Mean by ‘Proposition’

I think that propositions are the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity. Moreover, I think that propositions represent the world, or things in the world, as being a certain way. For example, the proposition *that O is F* represents *O* as being *F*. And I think that propositions are the objects of belief. Suppose that Jones believes that *O is F*. Then I say that Jones stands in the *believing* relation to the proposition *that O is F*.

The standard lore on propositions includes all that I have just affirmed, and more besides. For example, the standard lore says that not only is belief a propositional attitude, but fear and desire, among many others, are propositional attitudes as well. Consider these representative remarks, found at the opening of Nathan Salmon and Scott Soames’s introduction to *Propositions and Attitudes*:

The concept of a *proposition* is important in several areas of philosophy, and central to the philosophy of language. What is a proposition?...propositions are the sorts of things that are true or false. But making true or false assertions is not the only thing we do with propositions. We also bear cognitive attitudes toward them. Propositions are what we believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment about. When you fear that you will fail, or hope that you will succeed, when you venture a guess or feel certain about something, the object of your attitude is a proposition. That is what propositions are. (1988, 1)

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Salmon and Soames say that propositions are the objects of attitudes such as belief and fear and (let us add) desire. And in saying this, they take themselves to be articulating “the very concept” of *proposition* (1988, 1).

It might turn out that no single kind of entity does everything that the standard lore says that propositions do. If this is how things turned out, we could draw one of two conclusions. First, we could conclude that, because it is conceptually necessary that nothing counts as a proposition unless it lives up to the lore in its entirety, there are no propositions. Second, we could conclude that the standard lore on the concept of *proposition* is not quite right; in particular, we could conclude that propositions fail to play certain roles, roles that the lore mistakenly takes them to play as a matter of conceptual necessity.

I shall draw this second conclusion. I shall argue that although propositions exist, they are not the objects of fear and desire. But I think that propositions live up to much of the standard lore. For, as I noted at the outset, I think, first, that propositions are the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity; second, that belief is a propositional attitude; and, third, that propositions represent the world or things as being a certain way.

There is good reason to think that one kind of entity really does play all three of those roles. I think that beliefs have objects, that is, that there are entities that are believed. Since we have true beliefs and false beliefs, these objects of belief are presumably themselves bearers of truth and falsity.¹ And it seems that these bearers of

¹ I say that beliefs are true or false. From this I infer that either beliefs are the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity, or, instead, beliefs have objects, which are the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity. I deny that beliefs are the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity. So I conclude that beliefs have objects. (As a result, I think that saying that a belief is true or false is shorthand for saying that the object of that belief is true or false.) Here is one argument for the claim that the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity are not beliefs. There are some necessary truths; a necessary truth is necessarily true; so a necessary truth exists

truth and falsity must *represent* the world's being a certain way. (After all, something can be true only if it represents things as they are, and false only if it represents things as they are not.) So I conclude that these bearers of truth and falsity are identical with the objects of belief, which are identical with entities that represent things as being a certain way. I shall call these things 'propositions'.

II. What I Mean by 'Propositional Attitude'

Suppose that you desire Smith, and that your desire cannot be adequately described by saying that you have the desire that Smith love you. Or suppose that you fear dogs, and that this is not just a matter of fearing that a dog will bite you. Indeed, suppose that neither that desire nor that fear could be fully expressed by any series of that-clauses, not even in a language with a that-clause for every proposition. Then, so some have argued, neither that desire nor that fear is a propositional attitude (see Brewer, 2006; Montague, 2007).

I find their arguments persuasive. But their arguments are not mine. For their arguments conclude only that if the content of a particular fear or desire cannot be fully expressed by using that-clauses, then that fear or desire is not a propositional attitude. I shall conclude, however, that fear and desire are never propositional attitudes, not even

necessarily; but no belief exists necessarily; and so no belief is identical with a necessary truth. Here is another. It is possible for there to have been no believers and so no beliefs; so the proposition *that some beliefs exist* is possibly false; so that proposition could exist and be false; but no belief with the content *that some beliefs exist* could exist and be false; so the proposition *that some beliefs exist* is not identical with a belief; so propositions are not identical with beliefs; so the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity are not beliefs.

when we can fully express the content of the relevant fear or desire by using a that-clause.²

Suppose that ‘propositional attitude’ meant an attitude whose content can be fully expressed by a that-clause. Then my conclusion would be contradictory. But, happily, that is not what ‘propositional attitude’ means. Or, more carefully, that is not what I shall mean by ‘propositional attitude’. I shall use ‘propositional attitude’ to mean an attitude that is analyzed as—or reduced to—a relation between an agent and a proposition. For example, one’s desiring that one wins the election is a propositional attitude, in my sense, if and only if *what it is* for one to desire this is a matter of one’s standing in some relation to a proposition.

As already noted, I shall conclude that fear and desire are never propositional attitudes, not even when we can fully express their contents by using that-clauses. My conclusion is controversial. For, as we shall see, it is widely assumed that fear and desire are—in one way or another—analyzed as, or reduced to, relations holding between agents and propositions. I shall consider four such analyses. The first two are versions of the claim that fearing or desiring that such-and-such is analyzed as fearing or desiring the proposition *that such-and-such*. The second two are versions of the claim that fearing or desiring that such-and-such is analyzed as fearing or desiring that the proposition *that such-and-such* is true.

² Sometimes ‘fear’ means regretfully believe: “I fear that I let my friends down” (cf. King, 2007, 140). Sometimes ‘fear’ means sorrowfully suspect: “I fear that he has cancer.” In these cases ‘fear’ expresses a propositional attitude, since believing and suspecting are propositional attitudes. But I shall argue that genuine fear—fear of the sort discussed in the text, fear that is not itself a belief or a suspicion—is not a propositional attitude.

Perhaps some of the philosophers discussed below do not really mean what they seem to mean. For example, perhaps some who seem to *analyze* fear or desire as a relation to a proposition really mean, instead, only to *model* fear or desire as a relation to a proposition. If so, then they will not be refuted by this paper's arguments, even if those arguments are sound. This paper's main point, however, is not that this or that philosopher has been refuted. Its main point is that—in my sense of 'propositional attitude'—fear and desire are not propositional attitudes, but belief is.³

III. The Straightforward Version

I think that someone's believing that such-and-such is analyzed as that person's believing the proposition *that such-and-such*. The standard lore on propositions says that fear and desire are propositional attitudes like belief. So the standard lore seems to motivate the "straightforward version" of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. According to that version, someone's fearing or desiring that such-and-such is analyzed as that person's fearing or desiring the proposition *that such-and-such*.

With this in mind, consider this excerpt from the above passage from Salmon and Soames:

We...bear cognitive attitudes toward [propositions]. Propositions are what we believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment about. When you fear that you will fail, or hope that you will succeed...the object of your attitude is a proposition. (1988, 1)

³ The stoics took emotions to be judgments. Suppose that judgments just are beliefs. And suppose that, on the stoic view, fearing that such-and-such and desiring that such-and-such are emotions. Then the stoic view implies that these emotions are propositional attitudes if and only if beliefs are. Then the arguments of this paper, if successful, show that the stoic view is false. That would count as refuting some philosophers.

According to Salmon and Soames, we bear certain cognitive attitudes, including *fearing*, toward propositions. If they are right, then we fear propositions.

Robert Brandom says:

To be sapient is to have states such as belief, desire, and intention, which are contentful in the sense that the question can appropriately be raised under what circumstances what is believed, desired, or intended would be *true*. (Brandom, 1994, 5)

Brandom affirms that what is desired is the sort of thing that can be true. Thus he seems to affirm that what is desired is a proposition.

John Perry seems to agree:

...the attitudes are essentially relational in nature; they involve relations to the propositions at which they are directed... An attitude seems to be individuated by the agent, the type of attitude (belief, desire, etc.), and the proposition at which it is directed. (1994, 387-88)

Even some who reject the straightforward version take it to be the received view.

Michael McKinsey says:

Since it was first proposed by Frege (1892), the view that cognitive attitude verbs express mental relations that hold between persons and propositions has dominated discussion of the semantics of such verbs. (1999, 519)

McKinsey (1999, 530) takes the words ‘fear’ and ‘desire’ to be cognitive attitude verbs.

So McKinsey tells us that part of what has long “dominated discussion” is the view that

the relations of *fearing* and *desiring* hold between persons and propositions. Similarly,

Friederike Moltmann (2003, 77) tells us: “The traditional view is that propositional

attitudes are relations between agents and propositions.” And Moltmann (2003, 82)

thinks that, according to that view, fear and desire are propositional attitudes.

According to the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes, to fear or desire that such-and-such just is to fear or desire the

proposition *that such-and-such*. The straightforward version seems to be motivated by the standard lore on propositions. It is endorsed by various philosophers. And even its opponents typically take it to be the received view.⁴ Nevertheless, I say that the straightforward version is false.

To begin to see why I say this, consider these remarks from A. N. Prior in *Objects of Thought*:

It is...clear that we do not fear, hope, desire, etc., sentences. Or at least the objects of such fears, hopes, etc., as are expressed by saying that someone fears *that* so-and-so, hopes *that* so-and-so, desires *that* so-and-so, are not sentences. A man might perhaps in some odd mood or condition fear sentences as he fears dogs—if Robinson Crusoe had seen not a footstep but the inscription ‘The cat is on the mat’ written in the sand, it might have set him trembling—but this is quite a different matter... (1971, 14-15)

Except in the oddest of cases, we do not fear sentences, not as some fear dogs.⁵ Let us ignore these oddest of cases. So we do not thus fear sentences. And fearing a proposition in this way seems to be no more likely than fearing a sentence in this way.

So—except in the oddest of cases, which I shall ignore—we do not fear propositions, not as some fear dogs. But this does not automatically refute the straightforward version of the claim that fear is a propositional attitude. That is, it does not automatically refute the idea that to fear that such-and-such just is to fear the proposition *that such-and-such*. For perhaps the sense of ‘fear’ in which some people fear

⁴ As noted, McKinsey and Moltmann reject the straightforward version; but they do so for reasons other than those I shall develop in this paper.

⁵ In fact, Prior fails to deliver one of these oddest of cases, a case in which someone fears a sentence as some fear dogs. For presumably what Crusoe fears in Prior’s example is not the inscription in the sand, but rather that its inscriber walks the island.

dogs is not the sense of ‘fear’ in which—according to the straightforward version—one fears the proposition *that such-and-such*.⁶

Nevertheless, the straightforward version does imply that there is *some* sense in which we fear propositions. For that version says that when one fears that such-and-such, the object of one’s fear is the proposition *that such-and-such*. Thus that version implies that one fears the proposition *that such-and-such* in the way in which one fears that such-and-such. It implies, for example, that Jones fears the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* in just the way that he fears that a tiger will attack him.⁷

It would, of course, be pathological for Jones to fear a proposition as some fear dogs. But it would be equally pathological for him to fear a proposition as he fears that a tiger will attack him. After all, to fear that a tiger will attack one is to experience genuine fear, fear that sets the heart racing and the feet running. But we should not thus fear any abstract object. So we should not thus fear any proposition, since propositions are abstract.⁸ So I conclude that fearing that such-and-such is not a matter of fearing a proposition, not even the proposition *that such-and-such*.

⁶ Perhaps these two senses of ‘fear’ explain why—as was suggested at the start of §II—the content of one’s fear, when one fears dogs, cannot be fully expressed by any series of that-clauses, even though the content of one’s fear, when one fears that such-and-such, can be thus fully expressed.

⁷ Jones fears not merely that a tiger will attack *Jones*, but that a tiger will attack *him*. This introduces complicated and controversial issues that—just to keep things manageable—I shall ignore. And, happily, the arguments of this paper are independent of these issues. For example, suppose someone, with these issues in mind, insisted that the straightforward version implies that Jones fears the “indexical proposition” *that a tiger will attack me*. My arguments work against the claim that Jones fears that indexical proposition just as well as they work against the claim that he fears the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*.

⁸ It is fairly uncontroversial that, if propositions exist, they are abstract. (For example, many philosophers take propositions to be sets of some sort, such as sets of worlds or sets of centered worlds; see, e.g. Lewis, 1983. And if propositions are sets, they are abstract.) But some would object that propositions are not abstract, at least not all propositions. This objection is discussed in the following two sections of this paper.

Something similar goes for desiring. After all, I desire that my children flourish. But it would be pathological for me to desire an abstract object in just the way that I desire that my children flourish. So it would be pathological for me to thus desire the proposition *that Merricks's children flourish*. So I conclude that desiring that such-and-such is not a matter of desiring a proposition, not even the proposition *that such-and-such*.

Look at it this way. Truth depends on the world (Merricks, 2007 and 2009). So every true proposition is true because of how things are. Suppose that *that a tiger will attack Jones* is true. Then that proposition is true because a tiger will attack Jones. A true proposition is not identical with what its truth depends on.⁹ So *that a tiger will attack Jones* is not identical with what its truth depends on, namely, that a tiger will attack Jones. As a result, we must distinguish fearing the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* from fearing that a tiger will attack Jones.¹⁰ I say that the former is always pathological, and the latter sometimes reasonable. Likewise, we must distinguish desiring the proposition *that Merricks's children flourish* from desiring that my children flourish. Again, the former is pathological, the latter reasonable.

IV. Russell's 1903 Account of Propositions and the Identity Theory of Truth

⁹ At least not generally. Perhaps a proposition like *that at least one proposition exists* is identical with what its truth depends on. (But the next section considers two views that imply that, in general, true propositions are identical with what their truth depends on.)

¹⁰ I do not think that Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him amounts to a relation of *fearing* holding between Jones and some entity *x*, such as a truthmaker for the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*. For that proposition might be true, yet lack a truthmaker. In general, to say that truth depends on the world does not imply that, for each truth, there is some entity *x* on which it depends. Or so I have argued elsewhere; see Merricks, 2007 and 2009.

Some events are constituted by an object and one of that object's properties. For example, the event of your sitting is constituted by you and the property of *sitting*. There are more complex events as well. Some of these are constituted by more than one entity and the relations holding between or among them. For example, there is the event of your lending a book to Smith.¹¹

The event of your sitting is located just where the sitting you is located. And that event causes certain effects, such as (oops) the chair's breaking. So that event has spatial location and causal effects. So that event is not abstract, since abstracta are supposed to have neither spatial location nor causal effects. Similar reasons show that the event of your lending a book to Smith is not abstract. More generally, there are many non-abstract events.¹²

Bertrand Russell believed in events like these. Sometimes he even called them 'events' (as in parts of Russell, 1940). More often, he called them 'facts' (as in Russell, 1918, and parts of Russell, 1940). And in 1903, he called them 'propositions'. Indeed, Russell's 1903 account of the nature of propositions just is the account of the nature of events I have sketched above.

For example, Russell says that the proposition *that A differs from B* has as constituents the objects A and B and the relation of difference. And Russell adds: "Yet these constituents, thus placed side by side, do not reconstitute the proposition. The difference, which occurs in the proposition, actually relates A and B" (1903, 49). So

¹¹ I am using 'event' as David Armstrong (1997) uses 'state of affairs'.

¹² To be honest, I am not sure if there really are any events. But if there are events, some are abstract, such as the event of the number seven's being prime. With one possible exception to which I shall return in §VI, however, abstract events are not plausible objects of fear and desire. So I shall focus on non-abstract events here. (The aforementioned exception is the abstract event of a proposition's being true.)

Russell describes the proposition *that A differs from B* just as I would describe the event of A's differing from B.

Russell's 1903 account of propositions threatens my earlier argument against the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. This is because my argument turned on a distinction that Russell's 1903 account dissolves. This is the distinction between the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* and that on which that proposition's truth depends, namely, that a tiger will attack Jones. Given Russell's 1903 account, that proposition is identical with the event of a tiger's attacking Jones—and so it seems that that proposition is identical with that on which its truth depends.

There is a second way in which Russell's 1903 account supports the straightforward version. For suppose that Russell's 1903 account is true. Then Jones's fearing the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* is not a matter of his fearing anything abstract. Instead, Jones's fearing that proposition is his fearing the future event of his being attacked by a tiger. And there is nothing pathological about Jones's fearing that future event, and fearing it in the way that he fears that a tiger will attack him. Thus Russell's 1903 account of propositions renders the straightforward version plausible.

To begin to understand a second account of propositions that supports the straightforward version, consider these remarks from John McDowell:

There is no ontological gap between the sort of thing one can mean, or generally the sort of thing one can think, and the sort of thing that can be the case. When one thinks truly, what one thinks *is* what is the case. So since the world is everything that is the case (as [Wittgenstein] himself once wrote), there is no gap between thought, as such, and the world. Of course, thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought. (1994, 27)

McDowell claims that when one believes or thinks something true, what one believes or thinks is a part of the world, is something that “is the case.” Jennifer Hornsby (1997) begins with McDowell’s claim, and then moves to the thesis that each true proposition is identical with its “truthmaker.” Let us call this thesis the ‘identity theory of truth’. So Hornsby takes McDowell’s comments about the objects of true belief to lead to the identity theory of truth. The identity theory of truth resembles Russell’s 1903 account of propositions in at least two ways.

First, the identity theory dissolves the distinction between a true proposition and that on which that proposition’s truth depends. Thus the identity theory threatens my argument against the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes.

Second, the identity theory seems to make the straightforward version plausible. For example, given the identity theory of truth, the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* is, at least potentially, the future event of Jones’s being attacked by a tiger. (If that proposition is true, then it is that event.¹³) And this might be enough to make that proposition appropriately fearsome, at least to poor Jones.

With all this in mind, it is not surprising that Hornsby seems to endorse the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. She says:

‘Thinkable’ is a word for a sort of thing to which a person can be related in various modes. I say that the Labour Party will win the next election. I have just said something (that Labour will win) which many now believe, which a good few hope, which John Major fears. The example then shows that thinkables can be beliefs, hopes and fears. They are called beliefs when thought of in connection

¹³ If that proposition is false, it is not that event. But I do not know what, given the identity theory, that false proposition is supposed to be. Perhaps it is supposed to be an abstract object. (I briefly revisit this issue in the next section while considering the possible falsity of *that Smith is sitting*.)

with one psychological attitude towards them; they are called hopes or fears when thought of in connection with other attitudes. They are thought of as propositions when thought of as propounded (1997, 11).

The identity theory of truth seems to imply a particular metaphysics of true propositions, identifying them with event-like truthmakers. And, of course, Russell 1903 provides a metaphysics of propositions. Both metaphysics of propositions make the straightforward version plausible; on the other hand, an account of propositions as abstract makes that version implausible. Thus the plausibility of the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes is—at least in part—a matter of the metaphysics of propositions. So, whatever else we conclude, we should conclude that the metaphysics of propositions matters.

V. Objections to Russell 1903 and the Identity Theory

Consider the proposition *that A differs from B*. Russell's 1903 account tells us that that proposition is identical with the event of A's differing from B. But suppose that *that A differs from B* is false. Then the event of A's differing from B does not exist. So, given Russell's 1903 account, the proposition *that A differs from B* does not exist. More generally, it looks like Russell's 1903 account implies that no false propositions exist.¹⁴ But there are false propositions. So that account is false.

¹⁴ This is the standard objection to Russell's 1903 account. (For discussion of this objection, see Cartwright, 1987; see also King, 2007, 22-24.) Russell might have been aware of this objection right from the start. At least, he says the following:

True and false propositions alike are in some sense entities, and are in some sense capable of being logical subjects; but when a proposition happens to be true, it has a further quality, over and above that which it shares with false propositions... (1903, 49).

Russell 1903 does not tell us what the "further quality" is.

Assume that the proposition *that Smith is sitting* is true. According to the identity theory of truth, *that Smith is sitting* is identical with its truthmaker, which is presumably the event of Smith's sitting. But *that Smith is sitting* could have existed and been false. (To deny this is to veer perilously close to Russell 1903.) If that proposition were false, there would be no event constituted by Smith and *sitting*. So if that proposition were false, it would not be identical with an event constituted by Smith and *sitting*.

What goes for *that Smith is sitting* also goes for the event of Smith's sitting, since—given the identity theory and the actual truth of that proposition—they are one. Thus the identity theory implies that the event of Smith's sitting would have existed even if *that Smith is sitting* were false. And so it implies that the event of Smith's sitting might not have been constituted by Smith and *sitting*.

This implication is not contradictory. It is not contradictory even though the event of Smith's sitting is actually constituted by Smith and *sitting*. For it is not contradictory to claim that that event has its constituents contingently. Of course, this claim, even if not contradictory, might still be implausible. And I think it is implausible, since I cannot come up with any plausible account of that event's constituents in worlds in which *that Smith is sitting* is false. (Perhaps that event is abstract in those worlds?) At any rate, some will find in all of this a reason to reject the identity theory of truth.¹⁵

The event of Jones's existing seems to be a truthmaker for *that a human exists*. So, given the identity theory of truth, *that a human exists* is identical with the event of

¹⁵ The identity theory of truth implies that the event of Smith's sitting, while the truthmaker for *that Smith is sitting*, would have existed even if *that Smith is sitting* were false. And so it implies that the truthmaker for *that Smith is sitting* does not necessitate the truth of that proposition. This implication is a new reason to reject the identity theory, a reason that should appeal to truthmaker theorists in particular. For typical truthmaker theorists say that if x is a truthmaker for p , then necessarily, if x exists, then p is true (see Merricks, 2007, 5-14).

Jones's existing. The event of Smith's existing also seems to be a truthmaker for that same proposition. So, given the identity theory of truth, that proposition is also identical with the event of Smith's existing. Thus, by the transitivity of identity, the identity theory leads to the conclusion that the event of Smith's existing is identical with the event of Jones's existing. But this conclusion is absurd since—let us add—Smith is not identical with Jones. Because a single truth can have multiple truthmakers, the identity theory of truth is false.

I seem to be a truthmaker for both *that a human exists* and *that Merricks exists*. So, given the identity theory of truth, I am identical with both *that a human exists* and *that Merricks exists*. So, given the identity theory, the proposition *that a human exists* is identical with the proposition *that Merricks exists*. But this is absurd since the first of these propositions could be true even if the second were false. Because multiple truths can have a single truthmaker, the identity theory is false.

The identity theory of truth says that each truth is identical with its truthmaker. So the identity theory implies that each truth has a truthmaker. And so the identity theory is false. For some truths lack truthmakers. At least, I have argued elsewhere (Merricks, 2007) that some truths—including many true negative existentials, such as *that there are no white ravens*—lack truthmakers.¹⁶

¹⁶ Even some self-styled “truthmaker theorists” would agree that true negative existentials lack truthmakers (e.g., Mulligan, Simons, and Smith, 1984, 315; Smith, 1999, 285). Those who think that all true negative existentials have truthmakers typically think that, in many cases, a true negative existential's truthmaker will be something like a “totality state of affairs” (see Armstrong, 1997, 200; and discussion in Merricks, 2007, Ch. 3). But a totality state is of no help to the identity theorist. For if distinct negative existentials share a single truthmaker—namely, a totality state—the identity theory of truth absurdly implies that those distinct negative existentials are identical.

Recall Section III's conclusion that when one fears or desires that such-and-such, it is false that one fears or desires the proposition *that such-and-such*. Russell's 1903 account threatens that conclusion by, among other things, rendering certain propositions fearsome and others desirable. So too does the identity theory of truth. But Russell's 1903 account and the identity theory are both false. And I know of no other way to render propositions appropriately fearsome or desirable. So I conclude that propositions are neither fearsome nor desirable. And so I conclude that the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes is false.

VI. The Straw Version

The straightforward version of the claim that fear is a propositional attitude is false. So Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him is not a matter of his fearing the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*. Nevertheless, Jones's thus fearing is linked in some salient ways to that proposition. Perhaps the most obvious link is that, necessarily, Jones's fear that a tiger will attack will be realized if and only if that proposition is true.

As far as I know, the literature does not include an analysis of fear as a propositional attitude that trades explicitly on the aforementioned link. But such an analysis might be a natural fallback position for those who had endorsed—before it was refuted above!—the straightforward version. As a result, I think such an analysis is worth considering. (I shall focus on fear in this section; the reasoning of this section can easily be extended to desire.)

Jones fears that a tiger will attack him. And, as already noted, his fear will be realized just in case the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* is true. Perhaps, as a result, Jones stands in a relation to that proposition. Perhaps he stands in the *having-a-fear-that-is/was/will be-realized-just-in-case-the-following-is-true* relation to that proposition. Let us give that relation a name: ‘X’.

Jones fears that a tiger will attack him if and only if he stands in X to the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*. Now suppose, for the sake of argument, that Jones’s fearing that a tiger will attack him is *analyzed as* his standing in X to that proposition. And add that, in general, fearing that such-and-such is analyzed as standing in X to the proposition *that such-and-such*. ‘Fear’ already has some meanings. Let us stipulate an additional meaning. Let ‘fear’ mean: stand in X to.

I have just described a new version of the claim that fear is a propositional attitude. According to this version, what it is for Jones to fear that a tiger will attack him is for him to “fear” (in our stipulated sense) the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*. In general, according to this version, fearing that such-and-such is analyzed as “fearing” (in our stipulated sense) the proposition *that such-and-such*.

Let us call this the “straw version” of the claim that fear is a propositional attitude. The straw version sounds just like the straightforward version. But I do not think that anyone, other than straw philosophers, endorses the straw version. In particular, I do not think that the philosophers quoted in section III, who seem to endorse the straightforward version, were really endorsing the straw version. This is because none of those philosophers indicate that they are (misleadingly) using ‘fear’ to mean *stand in X to*.

Again, the straw version sounds just like the straightforward version. But it is immune to my main complaint about the straightforward version. For the straw version does not suggest that Jones fears the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* in the way in which he fears that a tiger will attack him. Instead, the straw version says that he “fears” that proposition only in that he stands in X to it. And that is not pathological.

Suppose that the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* is true. Then we know why it is true. It is true because a tiger will attack Jones. For truth depends on the world (see Merricks, 2007 and 2009). Along similar lines, suppose that Jones’s fear that a tiger will attack him will be realized. We know why it will be realized. It will be realized because a tiger will attack him. For the realization of fears depends on the world.

Now recall this bi-conditional: Jones fears that a tiger will attack him if and only if he stands in X to the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*. (Recall that to stand in X to a proposition is to stand in the *having-a-fear-that-is/was/will be-realized-just-in-case-the-following-is-true* relation to that proposition.) This bi-conditional is true. And it is easy to see why it is true. It is true because that in virtue of which Jones’s fear is realized—that a tiger will attack him—is nothing other than that in virtue of which *that a tiger will attack Jones* is true.

I think that Jones’s fearing that a tiger will attack him explains why Jones has a fear that would be realized by a tiger’s attacking him in the future. We have just seen that what would realize Jones’s fear partly explains why Jones stands in X to the relevant proposition. So I conclude that Jones’s fearing that a tiger will attack him partly explains why Jones stands in X to the relevant proposition.

Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him is explanatorily prior to his standing in X to the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*. Therefore, Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him cannot itself be explained by his standing in X to the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*. Therefore, his fearing that a tiger will attack him cannot be analyzed as (or reduced to, or taken to amount to nothing more than) his standing in X to the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*. Therefore the straw version of the claim that fear is a propositional attitude is false.

Let X* be the relation *acting-in-ways-that-are-aimed-at-keeping-the-following-from-being-true*. Let 'fear' mean: stand in X* to. Take the straw version, and exchange X for X*. The resulting variant of the straw version is vulnerable to a variant of my objection to the original straw version: Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him is part of what explains why he stands in X* to the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*, and so on.

Any variant of the straw version involves a relation that holds between an agent and the relevant proposition in question if and only if that agent has the relevant fear. I suspect that—as with X and X* above—what the agent fears will in most cases (partly) explain why that agent is thus related to that proposition. So I suspect that most variants of the straw version are vulnerable to variants of my objection to the original straw version.

But not all. For example, I do not think a variant of my objection undermines the variant of the straw version that invokes the relation of *fearing* itself. But this “variant of the straw version” just is the straightforward version, which has its own problems. Nor do I think a variant of my objection to the straw version undermines a version that invokes

the relation of *fearing-that-the-following-proposition-is-true*. We turn to this sort of approach in the next section.

VII. The Property Version

Unsurprisingly, Kris McDaniel and Ben Bradley (2008, 268) say: “The received wisdom is that desire is a propositional attitude.” But they immediately gloss that wisdom as follows: “Facts about desires consist of a person at a time desiring that some proposition is true” (2008, 268).

Similarly, Richard Jeffrey says:

To believe that it will rain tomorrow is to have a particular attitude toward the proposition that it will rain tomorrow; to desire that it rain tomorrow is to have another sort of attitude toward the same proposition... To desire peace, or a certain job, or the love of a good woman, or a ham sandwich, *is to desire that one proposition or another ... be true*: that there be peace, or that the desirer get the job, or some good woman’s love, or a ham sandwich now. (1990, 59, emphasis added)

Jeffrey seems to share McDaniel and Bradley’s understanding of the claim that desire is a propositional attitude. (So do others, such as Sumner, 1996, 124.) Presumably, they share a similar understanding of the claim that fear is a propositional attitude.

Here is one way we might interpret these philosophers. (The next section examines a different interpretation.) We might interpret them as endorsing the “property version” of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. According to this version, fearing or desiring that such-and-such just is—or is analyzed as, or is reduced to—fearing or desiring that the proposition *that such-and-such* has the property of *being true*.

Consider:

(a) Jones fears that a tiger will attack him.

Given the claim that fearing that such-and-such amounts to fearing that the proposition *that such-and-such* has the property of *being true*, it follows that (a) itself amounts to:

(b) Jones fears that *that a tiger will attack Jones* has the property of *being true*.

The property version says that *whenever* one fears that such-and-such, one fears that the proposition *that such-and-such* has the property of *being true*. The object of Jones's fear is described in (b) using a that-clause. So, given the property version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes, (b) itself amounts to:

(c) Jones fears that *that that a tiger will attack Jones has the property of being true* has the property of *being true*.

And so on. *Ad infinitum*. Thus the property version leads to an infinite regress.

I think the regress is vicious. But before saying why I think this, let me say a bit more about the nature of this regress, beginning with what it is not. It is not a regress involving an infinite number of things that are feared. (But if it were, it would surely be vicious.) For (b) is not supposed to describe a second thing that Jones fears, in addition to the thing he fears described by (a). Rather (a) and (b) purport to describe a single fear, with (b) giving an analysis or reduction or account of the object of that fear. Likewise, (c) purports to describe that same fear, giving an analysis of its object as well, one that goes deeper than that given by (b). And so on.

The object of the fear described by (a) is supposed to be analyzed by (b). And the object of the fear described by (b) is supposed to be analyzed by (c). And so on, without end. This endless regress implies that there is no final analysis of the object of the fear in question. As a result, the property version itself implies that there is no final analysis of

the object of the fear in question. I think everyone should agree that this is a cost of the property version.

And I think it is a cost that is too high to pay. This is because I think that if there really is something that is feared, then there would be a final analysis of that something. (We might not ever know what that analysis was.) So I think that the regress here undermines the claim that anything is feared in the first place. So I think that the regress is vicious.¹⁷

Moreover, consider the claim that Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him is analyzed as his fearing that the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* has the property of *being true*. This claim might not seem obviously true, but it might not seem obviously false either. On the other hand, I suspect that most will want to deny, right at first glance, that Jones's fearing such an attack is—as the regress implies—analyzed as (for example) his fearing that *that that a tiger will attack Jones has the property of being true has the property of being true* has the property of *being true*. And the more complex and repetitive the alleged analyses become—that is, the further down the regress we go—the less plausible the alleged analyses are.

There are really two points here. First, the further down the regress we go, the more inclined we shall be to reject the resulting analysis; and once we arrive at a regress-generated analysis that we do reject, we must conclude that the regress is vicious. Second, the property version implies that the further down the regress we go, the deeper the

¹⁷ Combine the claim that each composite object is reduced to its parts with the claim that all physical objects have other physical objects as parts, all the way down. These two claims imply that all objects are reduced to other objects, *ad infinitum*, with no “foundation” of irreducible objects. This seems to be vicious. And I think the infinite regress of analyses in the text is analogous.

analyses become; and so the better the analyses become; but I say that, on the contrary, as we go down the regress, the analyses get worse.

I think that the above regress is vicious. And I think that this regress is implied by the claim that one's fearing or desiring that such-and-such amounts to one's fearing or desiring that the proposition *that such-and-such* has the property of *being true*. So I reject the property version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes.

Suppose that I have argued for the truth of a certain proposition in print. Then I might very well desire that proposition's having the property of *being true*. And I might fear the negation of that proposition's having that same property. And there might be nothing pathological about any of this. But these cases are exceptional. By and large, we do not desire or fear that this or that proposition have the property of *being true*.

For example, when I desire that my children flourish, this does not reduce to my desiring that an abstract object has a certain property. When Jones fears that a tiger will attack him, this does not consist of his fearing that an abstract proposition has a certain property. Moreover, it is simply false that each case of fearing or desiring that such-and-such is analyzed as fearing or desiring that an abstract object has a certain property.

The property version says that fearing or desiring that such-and-such always amounts to fearing or desiring that an abstract object (namely, the proposition *that such-and-such*) has a certain property (namely, *being true*). I think that this is no more plausible than the discredited straightforward version, which says that fearing or desiring that such-and-such always amounts to fearing or desiring an abstract object (namely, the proposition *that such-and-such*). And so I have another reason, in addition to those

involving the above regress, for rejecting the property version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes.

VIII. The Deflationary Version

Suppose that a proposition's being true is not a matter of its having any property. Instead, suppose that a proposition's being true is nothing other than things being the way that proposition represents things as being.¹⁸ Then fearing that a proposition is true would not amount to fearing that that proposition exemplifies the property of *being true*. Rather, it would amount to fearing that things are as that proposition represents them as being. Indeed, even those who think there really is a property of *being true* could say that "fearing that a proposition is true" just is a (perhaps misleading) way to say that we fear that things are as that proposition represents things as being.

With all of this in mind, let the "deflationary version" be the claim that fearing or desiring that such-and-such consists in—or is analyzed as, or is reduced to—fearing or desiring that things are as they are represented as being by the proposition *that such-and-such*. For example, according to the deflationary version, Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him just is his fearing that the world is the way that the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* represents the world as being.

The philosophers quoted in the previous section could be interpreted as defending the deflationary version, as opposed to the property version. And the deflationary version is obviously untouched by one objection to the property version, the objection that when

¹⁸ See, for example, Horwich, 1998; this view is deflationary about truth, but not about the existence of propositions.

one fears that such-and-such, one does not thereby fear an abstract object's having a certain property. For, given the deflationary version, "fearing that a proposition is true," is not a matter of fearing that an abstract object has a certain property.

The deflationary version seems—at first glance—to generate a regress of the sort examined in the preceding section. Consider:

(a) Jones fears that a tiger will attack him.

Given the deflationary version, it follows that (a) itself amounts to:

(b*) Jones fears that things are as the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* represents things as being.

The object of Jones's fear is described in (b*) using a that-clause. So, given the deflationary version, it seems that (b*) itself amounts to:

(c*) Jones fears that things are as the proposition *that things are as the proposition that a tiger will attack Jones represents things as being* represents things as being.

And so on. *Ad infinitum*.

But perhaps we can block this regress. Consider what the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* represents. It represents the world's being such that a tiger will attack Jones. And so the claim that Jones fears that things are as that proposition represents them as being can be plausibly understood as the claim that Jones fears that a tiger will attack him. With this in mind, we might say that the object of fear in (b*) is analyzed not as we find in (c*), but rather as we find in:

(a) Jones fears that a tiger will attack him.

Regress blocked.

The deflationary version, when it blocks the regress in this way, implies that Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him is ultimately analyzed as Jones's fearing that a

tiger will attack him. This analysis is circular, and so no good. And the same goes for the regress-blocking deflationary version's analysis of the object of any other fear, or the object of any desire.

Perhaps we could recast the deflationary version so that it does not even purport to offer an analysis. Perhaps we could recast it to imply, for example, that Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him is not analyzed as, but is instead merely the same as, Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him. Thus recast, the deflationary version is not troubled by its failure to deliver a good analysis; such an analysis was never its goal.

Indeed, thus recast, the deflationary version is certainly true. It is certainly true because it is utterly trivial. But no triviality implies that fear and desire are each analyzed as (or are reduced to, etc.) a relation between an agent and a proposition. And so no triviality implies that fear and desire are propositional attitudes, as I have understood 'propositional attitudes' throughout this paper. And so the recast deflationary version is not really a version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes.

IX. Belief

I reject the above versions of the claim that fear and desire are analyzed as relations between an agent and a proposition. In other words, I reject the above versions of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. I know of no other version of that claim. So I conclude—at least provisionally, awaiting a new and credible version of that claim—that fear and desire are not propositional attitudes.

Assume—at least provisionally—that we have canvassed every credible version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. Any version of the claim that belief is a propositional attitude will parallel some version or other of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. So if belief is a propositional attitude, it must be a propositional attitude along the lines of one or another of the above versions of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes.

But belief cannot be a propositional attitude along the lines of any of the non-straightforward versions. This is because the problems with the non-straightforward versions of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes are likewise problems for parallel non-straightforward versions of the claim that belief is a propositional attitude.¹⁹ So I conclude that if belief is a propositional attitude, it must be a propositional attitude along the lines of the straightforward version. That is, it must be that to believe that such-and-such just is to believe—in the same sense of ‘believe’ in which we believe that such-and-such—the proposition *that-such-and-such*.

Return to my earlier argument for belief’s being a propositional attitude (§I). There are objects of belief. Since we have true beliefs and false beliefs, these objects of belief are presumably themselves bearers of truth and falsity. Moreover, these bearers of truth and falsity must represent the world’s being a certain way. So there is a single kind of entity that is representational, a bearer of truth and falsity, and also an object of belief. I call entities of this kind ‘propositions’.²⁰

¹⁹ Here is just one example: the regress afflicting the property version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes afflicts a property version of the claim that belief is a propositional attitude.

²⁰ Note that my argument for belief’s being a propositional attitude did not invoke any thesis about that-clauses, much less the thesis that that-clauses always name objects—lest I be forced to endorse parallel arguments such as: we desire that such-and-such; that-clauses always name objects; etc. Nor do I defend

My argument tells us that the object of one's belief—that is, the entity that one believes—is a proposition. So, presumably, when one believes that such-and-such, the entity that one believes is the proposition *that such-and-such*. In this way, my argument for belief's being a propositional attitude supports more than the claim that belief is, in some way or other, analyzed as a relation between an agent and a proposition. It directly supports the straightforward version of the claim that belief is a propositional attitude. Of course, I reject the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes (§§III-V). So I conclude—and this is not provisional—that fear and desire are not propositional attitudes in the particular way that belief is a propositional attitude.

I have just given an argument for the claim that belief is a propositional attitude. I find this argument convincing. But it is not a full-dress defense of that claim.²¹ Such a defense is beyond the scope of this paper. Nor should such a defense be required. After all, it is part of the standard lore that belief is a propositional attitude. Since every argument must start from somewhere, the standard lore is as fair a place to start as any. (My brief argument for belief's being a propositional attitude was thus supererogatory.) Of course, this paper argues that the standard lore on propositions ought to be revised. In particular, it argues that fear and desire are not propositional attitudes.

To repeat, I think it is fair to assume, at least for starters, that belief is a propositional attitude. But even some who grant this assumption might object to my

this familiar argument for belief's being a propositional attitude: because x and y believe "the same thing," there must be a single entity that they both believe, etc.; this argument seems no better or worse than an argument that begins: because x and y desire "the same thing," etc.

²¹ For example, it does not reply to objections to that claim. But my brief defense is not quite as brief as I have just suggested; the reasoning in footnote 1 is also part of my defense.

persisting in the claim that belief is a propositional attitude. For some might think that denying that fear and desire are propositional attitudes—as I do in this paper—thereby undercuts the claim that belief is a propositional attitude. For, so one might naturally think, we should not treat belief one way, and fear and desire another, with regard to being propositional attitudes.

I say that this natural thought is false. To begin to see why I say this, consider again my brief argument for belief's being a propositional attitude. That argument reveals a central difference between belief, on the one hand, and fear and desire, on the other. For that argument cannot be adapted to show that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. This is because that argument turns on the premise that we have true and false beliefs. No parallel argument for the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes seems plausible. For—while fears may be realized or unrealized and desires may be satisfied or unsatisfied—neither fears nor desires are true or false. Thus we have a reason to treat fear and desire one way with respect to being propositional attitudes, and belief another.

There is a second reason to embrace this asymmetry. Recall my main objection to the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. That objection was that propositions—that is, abstract propositions—are neither fearsome nor desirable, and so are not fitting objects of fear and desire (§III). This objection cannot be adapted to the straightforward version of the claim that belief is a propositional attitude. This is because propositions—even abstract propositions—are the bearers of truth-values, and, as a result, they are fitting objects of belief.²²

²² Saying that a belief is true or false is shorthand for saying that the object of that belief is true or false (§I). Bearers of truth and falsity are fitting objects of belief. This does not imply that *entities whose objects*

This paper has focused on only three attitudes: belief, fear, and desire. But the strategy of this paper suggests a couple of tests for evaluating whether other alleged propositional attitudes really are propositional attitudes. First, if the object of the relevant attitude is either true or false, then the attitude in question is a propositional attitude. Second, if it would be pathological to bear the attitude in question toward an abstract object, even if that object were true or false, then that attitude is not a propositional attitude.

Note that my tests here are not matters of surface grammar. For example, it is not grammatical to say: “Joker suspects the proposition that Batman will capture him” (cf. Bach, 1997, 225; McKinsey, 199, 530). But I do not think that this proves that the Joker’s suspecting is not a propositional attitude. On the contrary, if what the Joker suspects has a truth-value, then my test says—and I concur—that suspecting is a propositional attitude.²³ Apparently, facts about the contingent and conventional grammar of English do not dictate the metaphysics of a thinking agent and his or her relations to a proposition.

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are true or false are fitting objects of belief. So I claim that propositions, but not beliefs or other derivative truth-bearers, are fitting objects of belief.

²³ On my test, suspecting, thinking, and remembering come out as propositional attitudes. But moving from ‘S suspects/thinks/remembers that *p*’ to ‘S suspects/thinks/remembers the proposition that *p*’ involves a shift from being grammatical to being ungrammatical, or at least a shift in meaning. For an explanation of these shifts that is consistent with suspecting, thinking, and remembering being propositional attitudes, see King, 2007, 137-163. See also Schiffer, 2003, 92-95.

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