

Propositional Attitudes?*

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ABSTRACT According to the standard lore on propositions, there are many propositional attitudes, including belief, fear, and desire. The standard lore is partly correct: belief is a propositional attitude. But, so this paper argues, fear and desire are never propositional attitudes, not even when the content of the relevant fear or desire can be fully expressed by using a that-clause.

1. What I Mean by ‘Proposition’

I think that propositions are the primary bearers of truth and falsity. Moreover, I think that propositions represent things 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, p. 1)

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 a proposition (1988, p. 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 a

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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 or 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 primary bearers of truth and falsity; second, that propositions represent things as being a certain way; and, third, that propositions are the objects of belief.

Part of the reason that I think that one kind of entity plays all three of those roles is that I think that beliefs are not the primary truth-bearers.¹ Nevertheless, I say that beliefs can be true. And I think that the truth of beliefs should be understood in terms of the truth of the primary truth-bearers. In particular, I say that for a belief to be true is for its object, itself a primary truth-bearer, to be true. Thus we avoid the unacceptable result that predicating ‘is true’ of both a belief and also a primary truth-bearer is like predicating ‘is a bank’ of both a financial institution and also a riverbank.

So a belief’s being true just is that belief’s having an object that is true. Similarly, a belief’s being false just is that belief’s having an object that is false. Something can be true only if it represents things as they are, and false only if it represents things as they are not. So any bearer of truth or falsity must represent things as being a certain way. So the primary bearers of truth and falsity must represent things as being a certain way. So I conclude that there are entities that are the primary bearers of truth and falsity, that represent things as being a certain way, and that are the objects of belief. I shall call these entities ‘propositions’.

2. What I Mean by ‘Propositional Attitude’

Suppose that you desire Smith, and that your desire cannot be adequately described by saying that you 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 when the content of a fear or desire cannot be fully expressed by using that-clauses, that fear or desire is not a propositional attitude. I shall

¹ This is not the place for a detailed defense of the claim that beliefs are not the primary truth-bearers. But let me briefly describe just two arguments for that claim. First, there are some necessary truths; so there are primary truth-bearers that are necessarily true; a necessary truth exists necessarily; so some primary truth-bearers exist necessarily; but no belief exists necessarily; so beliefs are not the primary truth-bearers. Second, 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 primary bearers of truth and falsity are not beliefs.

conclude, however, that fear and desire are never propositional attitudes, not even when we can fully express the content of the relevant fear or desire by using a that-clause.²

Suppose that there are two kinds of fear. The first might involve fearing dogs, or tigers, or dangerous people. The second might involve fearing that a dog will bite you, or that a tiger will attack you, or that a dangerous person will harm you. Likewise, suppose that there are two kinds of desire, the first involving (e.g.) desiring a person, and the second involving (e.g.) desiring that one's children flourish. With all of this in mind, we could describe my conclusion as follows: neither fear nor desire of the second kind is a propositional attitude. (For what it is worth, I would say the same about fear and desire of the first kind.)

Again, I shall conclude that fear and desire are never propositional attitudes, not even when we can fully express their contents by using that-clauses. 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. 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, my desiring that my children flourish is a propositional attitude, in my sense, if and only if my desiring this is analyzed as, or reduced to, my standing in a certain relation to a particular proposition.

I shall conclude that fear and desire are not analyzed as, or reduced to, relations between agents and propositions, not even when their contents can be fully expressed by using that-clauses. My conclusion is not contradictory. But it is controversial. For, as we shall see, it is widely assumed that the relevant kind of fear and the relevant kind of 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.

Perhaps some of the philosophers discussed below do not really mean what they seem to mean. Perhaps some who seem to *analyze* fear or desire as a relation to a proposition really intend, 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, not even if those arguments are sound. This paper's main point, however, is not that this or that

² Sometimes 'fear' means regretfully believe: 'I fear that I let my friends down' (cf. King 2007, p. 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 the kind of fear discussed throughout this paper is not a propositional attitude. Instances of that kind of fear are more naturally described with gerunds than with that-clauses. (For example, 'Jones fears being attacked by a tiger' is a more natural way to describe the relevant fear than is 'Jones fears that a tiger will attack him'.) But anyone who thinks that instances of that kind of fear are propositional attitudes is likely to use that-clauses to describe them. So, in the spirit of fair play, I too shall use that-clauses to describe them.

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

3. The Straightforward Version

Belief is a propositional attitude. At least, a certain kind of belief is a propositional attitude. This is the kind of belief that involves (e.g.) believing that the sky is blue, as opposed to (e.g.) believing your mother. Or so I say. Suppose that I am right. In particular, suppose that believing that such-and-such is analyzed as believing the proposition *that such-and-such*.

The standard lore on propositions says that the relevant kinds of fear and desire are propositional attitudes in the way in which the relevant kind of belief is a propositional attitude. So—supposing that I am right about the way in which belief is a propositional attitude—the standard lore motivates the claim that fearing or desiring that such-and-such is analyzed as fearing or desiring the proposition *that such-and-such*. Let us call this claim the ‘straightforward version’ of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes.

With the straightforward version 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, p. 1)

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, p. 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, pp. 387-88)

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.

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, p. 519)

McKinsey (1999, p. 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, p. 77) tells us: ‘The traditional view is that propositional attitudes are relations between agents and propositions.’ And Moltmann (2003, p. 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 shall argue that the straightforward version is false.

A. N. Prior says:

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, pp. 14-15)

Except for 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 for the oddest of cases, which I shall ignore—we do not fear propositions, not as some fear dogs.

I shall argue that we do not fear propositions, and that this constitutes an objection to the straightforward version. But I want to be perfectly clear that my argument does not trade on the fairly obvious point just made, the point that we do not fear propositions *as some fear dogs*. Again, I shall not argue that, because we do not fear propositions as

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, had Crusoe seen an inscription written in the sand, he would have feared not the inscription itself, but rather its inscriber.

some fear dogs, the straightforward version is false. I shall not argue in this way because the straightforward version does not imply that we fear propositions as some fear dogs.

Nevertheless, the straightforward version does imply that we fear propositions in some sense of the word ‘fear’. After all, the straightforward version says that to fear that such-and-such just is to fear the proposition *that such-and-such*. Again, the straightforward version says that when one fears that such-and-such, the object of one’s fear is the proposition *that such-and-such*. As a result, the straightforward 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 the way in which he fears that a tiger will attack him.⁶

It would, of course, be pathological for Jones to fear a proposition as some fear dogs. Moreover, I say that it would be pathological for him to fear a proposition as he fears that a tiger will attack him. To begin to see why I say this, consider that truth depends on the world (Merricks 2007 and Merricks 2009). That is, every true proposition is true because of how things are. For example, suppose that the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* is true. That proposition is true because of how things are. Specifically, it is true because a tiger will attack Jones.

A true proposition is not identical with what its truth depends on.⁷ So the proposition *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. With this distinction in hand, we can set aside (for the moment) Jones’s allegedly fearing the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones*, while still focusing on Jones’s fearing that a tiger will attack him.

Jones fears that a tiger will attack him. Of course, Jones does not fear that a tiger will attack him in the way that some fear dogs. Even so, Jones’s fear that a tiger will attack him is not an artificial sort of ‘fear’. Instead, Jones really fears that a tiger will attack him. No one should really fear any abstract object. Add that Jones does not fear what he should not fear. So Jones does not really fear any abstract object. So he does not fear any abstract object in the way that he fears that a tiger will attack him.

Propositions are abstract objects.⁸ So Jones does not fear any proposition in the way that he fears that a tiger will attack him. So Jones does not thus fear the proposition

⁶ Jones fears not merely that a tiger will attack *Jones*, but that a tiger will attack *him*. This introduces 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*.

⁷ 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.)

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, for example, Lewis 1979. And if propositions are sets, they are abstract.) But some would object that propositions are

that a tiger will attack Jones. 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*. So fearing that such-and-such is not a matter of fearing the proposition *that such-and-such*. Therefore, the straightforward version of the claim that fear is a propositional attitude is false.

Something similar goes for desiring. After all, I desire that my children flourish. That my children flourish is not the same thing as the proposition *that Merricks's children flourish*, since the truth of the latter depends on the former. Moreover, I think that it would be pathological for me to desire an abstract object in just the way that I desire that my children flourish. So I assume that I do not thus desire an abstract object. So I assume that I do not thus desire the proposition *that Merricks's children flourish*. So I conclude that desiring that such-and-such is not a matter of desiring the proposition *that such-and-such*. So I conclude that the straightforward version of the claim that desire is a propositional attitude is false.

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

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.⁹

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 events that are not abstract.¹⁰

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 1918-19, 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, p. 49). So Russell describes the proposition *that A differs from B* just as I would describe the event of A's differing from B.

not abstract, at least not all propositions. This objection is discussed in the following two sections of this paper.

⁹ I am using 'event' as David Armstrong (1997) uses 'state of affairs'.

¹⁰ To be honest, I am not sure that there really are any events. But if there are, some are abstract (like the number seven's being prime) and some—the ones I shall focus on here—are not abstract (like your sitting).

Russell's 1903 account of propositions threatens my 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 a proposition and that on which that proposition's truth depends. For example, given Russell's 1903 account, the proposition *that a tiger will attack Jones* 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. More generally, 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, p. 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 a thesis that she calls 'the identity theory of truth'. Stewart Candlish (2006) understands this theory of truth as the claim that each true proposition is identical to its 'truthmaker'. I shall understand the identity theory in the way Candlish does. The identity theory, thus understood, may (or may not) depart from the positions of McDowell and Hornsby.

I think that the truth of some propositions can depend on the world even if those propositions lack truthmakers (Merricks 2007). But if a proposition has a truthmaker, its truthmaker is that on which its truth depends. Of course, the identity theory dissolves the distinction between a true proposition and its truthmaker. So the identity theory thereby dissolves the distinction between a true proposition and that on which its truth depends. My argument against the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes turned on just that distinction. So the identity theory, by dissolving that distinction, threatens my argument against the straightforward version. This is the first way in which the identity theory is like Russell's 1903 account of propositions.

There is a second way in which the identity theory and Russell's 1903 account of propositions are alike. The identity theory, like Russell's 1903 account, 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.¹¹) And this might be enough to make that proposition appropriately fearsome, at least to poor Jones. That is, it might be enough to make that proposition fearsome in the way that being attacked by a tiger is fearsome, as opposed to the way that tigers, or certain dogs, are fearsome.

With all this in mind, it is not surprising that Hornsby, who defends something similar to (or perhaps the same as) the identity theory as I understand it, 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 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, p. 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.

5. Objections to Russell 1903 and the Identity Theory

Consider the proposition *that A differs from B*. According to Russell's 1903 account of propositions, that proposition is identical to 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.¹² But there are false propositions. So that account is false.

¹¹ If that proposition is false, it is not that event. But I do not know what, according to the identity theory, that false proposition is supposed to be.

¹² This is the standard objection to Russell's 1903 account. (For discussion of this objection, see Cartwright 1987; see also King 2007, pp. 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, p. 49).

Assume that the proposition *that Smith is sitting* is true. According to the identity theory of truth, *that Smith is sitting* is identical to 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 to) 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. That is, if *that Smith is sitting* were false, then the event of Smith's sitting would not be constituted by Smith and *sitting*. This implication of the falsity of *that Smith is sitting* is not contradictory, even though Smith's sitting is actually constituted by Smith and *sitting*. For it is not contradictory to say that that event has its two constituents contingently. But I do think that this implication is implausible. For I cannot think of any plausible account of what that event's constituents would be, were that event not constituted by Smith and *sitting*. At any rate, some will find in all of this a reason to reject the identity theory of truth.¹³

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 to the event of 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 to 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 to the event of Jones's existing. But this conclusion is absurd since—let us add—Smith is not identical to 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 to both *that a human exists* and *that Merricks exists*. So, given the identity theory, the proposition *that a human exists* is identical to 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 to 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.¹⁴

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

¹³ 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, by its mere existence, 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, pp. 5-14).

¹⁴ Even some self-styled 'truthmaker theorists' would agree that some true negative existentials lack truthmakers (e.g., Mulligan, Simons, and Smith 1984, p. 315; Smith 1999, p. 285). Those who think that all

Recall Section 3'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 appropriately fearsome and others appropriately 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.

6. 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 fear 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 him 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. So I think that 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. 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*.

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, p. 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.

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 3, 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 objections to the straightforward version. This is because the straw version does not even 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. In fact, the straw version does not suggest that Jones genuinely fears that proposition in any way at all. 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 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 that a variant of my objection undermines the variant of the straw version that invokes genuine fear, as opposed to an artificial ‘fear’ constructed out of X or X* or some similar relation. So I do not think that a variant of my objection undermines a variant of the straw version that invokes the kind of fear involved in fearing that such-and-such. But this ‘variant of the straw version’ just is the straightforward version, which has its own problems. Nor do I think that a variant of my objection to the straw version undermines a variant of the straw version that invokes the relation of *fearing-that-the-following-proposition-is-true*. We turn to this ‘variant of the straw version’ in the next section.

7. The Property Version

Unsurprisingly, Kris McDaniel and Ben Bradley (2008, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 124.) Presumably, they share a similar understanding of the claim that fear is a propositional attitude.

We might interpret these philosophers as endorsing the ‘property version’ of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. (The next section examines a different interpretation.) According to the property 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 property version, (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) with 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 it is vicious, 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 is 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.¹⁵

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 off the bat, that Jones's fearing such an attack is—as the regress implies—analyzed as (for example) his fearing that *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*. In general, as we go further down the regress, the alleged analyses not only become more complex and repetitive, they also become less plausible.

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

¹⁵ Combine the claim that each composite object is reduced to its parts with the claim that all objects have other 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.

the 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 that proposition has the property of *being true*. And I might fear that the negation of that proposition has 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 has the property of *being true*. More importantly, we do not desire or fear that this or that proposition has that property in the ways required by the property version.

To begin to see why I say this, consider that my desiring that my children flourish is not analyzed as my desiring that an abstract object has a certain property. Nor is Jones's fearing that a tiger will attack him reduced to his fearing that an abstract object has a certain property. So it is false that each case of fearing or desiring that such-and-such amounts to fearing or desiring that an abstract object has a certain property.

The property version implies, however, that fearing or desiring that such-and-such always amounts to fearing or desiring that an abstract object has a certain property. This is because the property version implies that fearing or desiring that such-and-such is always analyzed as fearing or desiring that the (abstract) proposition *that such-and-such* has the property of *being true*. Thus we have another reason, in addition to those involving the above regress, to reject the property version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes.

8. 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.¹⁶ 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.

¹⁶ See, for example, Horwich 1998; this view is deflationary about truth, but not about the existence of propositions.

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 untouched by one objection to the property version. This is the objection that fearing or desiring that such-and-such is not a matter of fearing or desiring that an abstract object has a certain property. This objection does not touch the deflationary version because the deflationary version does not imply that fearing or desiring that such-and-such is a matter of fearing or desiring that an abstract object has a certain property.

But the deflationary version does seem—at first glance—to be threatened by my other objections to the property version. This is because the deflationary version seems—again, at first glance—to generate a vicious regress similar to the vicious regress generated by the property version.

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.

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 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.

9. Belief

I reject the above versions of the claim that fear and desire are analyzed as relations between agents and propositions. 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. (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.) 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 sense of ‘believe’ in which we believe that such-and-such—the proposition *that-such-and-such*.

Recall my earlier argument for belief’s being a propositional attitude (§1). Beliefs are not the primary bearers of truth and falsity. For a belief to be true (false) is for its object, itself a primary bearer of truth (falsity), to be true (false). Something can be true (false) only if it represents things as they are (are not). So the primary bearers of truth and falsity must represent things as being a certain way. So there are entities that are the primary bearers of truth and falsity, that represent things as being a certain way, and that are the objects of belief. I call these entities ‘propositions’.¹⁷

¹⁷ 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 this familiar argument for belief’s being a propositional attitude: because you and I believe ‘the same thing’, there must be a single entity that we both believe, etc.; this argument seems no better or worse than an argument that begins: because you and I desire ‘the same thing’, etc.

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 (§§3-5). 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.

The argument I have just given in support of the straightforward version of the claim that belief is a propositional attitude cannot be plausibly transformed into an argument for the straightforward version of the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes. For my argument turns on, among other things, the idea that we have true and false beliefs. No parallel argument for the claim that fear and desire are propositional attitudes is plausible. For, while fears may be realized or unrealized and desires may be satisfied or unsatisfied, neither fears nor desires are true or false. All of this is further support for the thesis that we should treat belief one way with respect to being a propositional attitude, and fear and desire another.

More support for this thesis comes from recalling 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 appropriately fearsome nor appropriately desirable, and so are not fitting objects of fear and desire (§3). That objection cannot be transformed into a plausible objection to the straightforward version of the claim that belief is a propositional attitude. For something does not need to be fearsome or desirable to be a fitting object of belief. It does, however, need to be a bearer of truth-values. And propositions—even abstract propositions—are bearers of truth-values.

This paper has focused on only three attitudes: belief, fear, and desire. But the comments I have just made suggest a couple of tests for evaluating whether other alleged propositional attitudes really are propositional attitudes. First, if instances of the attitude are true or false, then that attitude is a propositional attitude. Second, if abstract entities are not fitting objects of the attitude, not even if those entities are true or false, then that attitude is not a propositional attitude.

Suppose that we want to say that the Joker suspects that Batman will capture him. Then we can say: 'The Joker suspects that Batman will capture him.' But we should not say: 'The Joker suspects the proposition that Batman will capture him' (cf. Bach 1997, p. 225; McKinsey 1999, p. 530). I do not think that this shows that suspicion is not a propositional attitude. On the contrary, if the Joker's suspicion has a truth-value, then one of my tests says—and I concur—that suspicion is a propositional attitude.¹⁸ Apparently,

¹⁸ 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 in meaning. For an explanation of these shifts that is consistent with suspecting, thinking, and remembering being propositional attitudes, see King 2007, pp. 137-163. See also Schiffer 2003, pp. 92-95.

the contingent and conventional grammar of English does not dictate the metaphysics of how a thinking agent is related to propositions.¹⁹

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