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# **The Unity of the Proposition**

by

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## The Unity of the Proposition

Propositions play a central role in the philosophies of both Frege and the early Russell. According to both, propositions are meanings of sentences, bearers of truth, and objects of the attitudes – the things asserted, believed, and known. Despite this, both held that there is a mystery at the heart of the proposition. For Frege and Russell, propositions are complex entities the constituents of which are meanings of the constituents of sentences that express them. Just as sentences aren't arbitrary collections of unrelated words and phrases, but rather have a structural unity that distinguishes them from other possible aggregates of words, so propositions aren't arbitrary collections of expression meanings, but rather have a structural unity that distinguishes them from other aggregates of their parts. It is this unity that Frege and Russell find mysterious.

### Frege

Frege's explanation of how the parts of a proposition "hold together" rests on a distinction between the senses and referents of predicates, and those of what he calls *proper names* (a category that includes both sentences and singular terms). The senses of proper names are, he says, complete, or saturated, whereas those of predicates are incomplete, or unsaturated. This distinction is repeated for referents; the referent of proper name is an object, while that of a predicate is said to be a concept. These dichotomies are intended to be mutually exclusive. No concept is an object, and no unsaturated sense is saturated. Whether or not saturated senses can ever be referents of proper names, and so qualify as objects, is a vexed question.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the final verdict on this point, however, there is reason to think that *unsaturated* senses, being incomplete, can't be referents of proper names, and so aren't objects.

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<sup>1</sup> Although Frege sometimes seems to contrast senses in general with objects, he doesn't, I think, *need* to hold that saturated senses can't be referents of singular terms. Indeed, he takes thoughts, which are saturated senses, to be the indirect referents of sentences, which, for him, count as proper names.

It is not easy to see what all this amounts to. If, following Frege, we start with language, and take singular terms and sentences as basic, we can characterize a predicate as an expression obtained from a sentence by removing one or more occurrences of singular terms. The resulting notion is that of something with gaps that need to be filled in order to form a sentence. It is then tempting to think that the *sense* of a predicate is something that needs similar completion in order to form a proposition – a sense with gaps into which the senses of singular terms can fit, like pieces of a puzzle. Though it's not as easy to see what the incompleteness of concepts amounts to – especially after its paradoxical corollary that the concept *horse* is not a concept is pointed out – one may be inclined to retreat, with Frege, into the idea of an unavoidable “awkwardness of language” that limits us when we apply our meager linguistic resources to language itself.

It is here that Frege's discussion acquires its all-too-suspicious depth. For him, the fog of paradox is nothing against the doctrines engulfed in it, but rather is due to the unspeakable depths being plumbed. We are invited to think that what sounds false or paradoxical stems from limitations inherent in the use of language to explore its own foundations. Faced with this reality, it is only charitable, he thinks, to cut the truth-seeker some slack.

“By a kind of **necessity** of language, my expressions, taken literally, sometimes miss my thought: I mention an object [e.g. the concept *horse*], when what I intend is a concept. I fully realize that in such cases I was relying upon a reader who would be ready to meet me half-way – who does not begrudge a pinch of salt.”<sup>2</sup>

The problem, however, is not one of charity. The problem is the uncertain support for, and the dubious intelligibility of, Frege's doctrines. Before tying ourselves up in knots trying to assimilate them, we need to look more closely at their content, and the arguments he gives for them. What exactly is the problem of the unity of the proposition, and how – short of appealing

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<sup>2</sup> Gottlob Frege, “On Concept and Object,” originally published 1892, reprinted in Peter Geach and Max Black, *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 1960, 54, my emphasis.

to the crude analogy of a jigsaw puzzle – are incomplete predicate-senses and referents, supposed to solve it?

Frege's initial statement of the difficulty is as follows:

"It must indeed be recognized that here we are confronted by an awkwardness of language, which I admit cannot be avoided, if we say that the concept *horse* is not a concept, whereas, e.g., the city of Berlin is a city, and the volcano Vesuvius is a volcano. Language is here in a predicament that justifies the departure from custom... In logical discussions one quite often needs to assert something about a concept, and to express this in the form usual for such assertions – viz., to make what is asserted of the concept into the content of the grammatical predicate. Consequently, one would expect that the reference of the grammatical subject would be the concept; **but the concept as such cannot play this part, in view of its predicative nature; it must first be ... represented by an object.** We designate this object by prefixing the words 'the concept', e.g. 'The concept *man* is not empty.' Here the first three words are to be regarded as a proper name, **which can no more be used predicatively than 'Berlin' or 'Vesuvius.'** When we say 'Jesus falls under the concept *man*,' then, setting aside the copula, the predicate is: 'someone falling under the concept *man*' and this means the same as 'a man.' But the phrase 'the concept man' is only part of this predicate."<sup>3</sup>

Here we have a statement of the view that the referent of an expression that can be used predicatively can never be the referent of a singular term. We also have the germ of a pair of arguments for that view.<sup>4</sup> The arguments involve three sentences.

1. Jesus is a man.
2. Jesus falls under the concept *man*
3. Jesus is the concept *man*.

#### Argument 1

- P1. (1) and (2) mean the same thing, as do their predicates, 'a man' (ignoring the copula in (1)) and 'falls under the concept *man*'.
- P2. The singular term 'the concept *man*' does not mean the same thing as the predicate 'falls under the concept *man*'.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 47, my emphasis.

<sup>4</sup>Frege also says: "We may say in brief, taking 'subject' and 'predicate' in the linguistic sense: A concept is the reference of a predicate; An object is something that can never be the whole reference of a predicate, but can be the reference of a subject." (46-7)

- C1. So, 'the concept *man*' does not have the same sense as the predicate 'a man'.
- C2. More generally, no singular term has the same sense as the predicate 'a man'. Similarly for all other predicates.

### Argument 2

- P1. If the singular term 'the concept *man*' in (3) had the same sense as the predicate 'a man' in (1), then (3) should have a reading in which 'is' occurs as copula, and (1) and (3) have the same sense.
- P2. There is no reading of (3) in which 'is' occurs as copula, let alone one in which (1) and (3) have the same sense.
- C1. As before.
- C2. As before.

It is plausible to suppose that if these arguments were sound, then an even stronger Fregean conclusion could be established -- namely that it is impossible for a predicate to have the same sense as a singular term. Even then, however, Frege's thesis C3 would remain to be established -- since it doesn't follow from the claim that no expression in one class can have the same sense as any expression in another class that no expression in the first can refer to the same thing as any expression in the second.

- C3. No singular term can refer to the referent of any predicate.

I will not pause to explore whether or not C3 could, indeed, be reached from C2. Instead I will raise doubts about the arguments for C2.

The tacit assumption behind P1 of Argument 2 is that the grammatical structure of a complex expression makes no significant contribution to its sense. The phrases 'a man' and 'the concept *man*' are instances of different grammatical categories. The category to which the former belongs allows it to be combined with the copula to form a grammatical predicate; the category to which the latter belongs, we may suppose, does not. Thus, (1) and (3) have different

grammatical structures – one being well-formed with ‘is’ as copula, and one not. If the rules assigning senses to sentences are sensitive not only to the senses of their parts, but also to their grammatical structure, then there is no reason to think that (1) and (3) must have the same sense, if their parts do. Since Frege says nothing to exclude this, Argument 2 is inconclusive.

Argument 1 is no better. Surely, it’s possible for someone to assert or believe that Jesus is a man, without having studied philosophical logic, and so without asserting or believing anything about objects falling under concepts. If so, and if propositions are, as Frege takes them to be, the objects of propositional attitudes, then P1 is false, since (1) and (2) don’t express the same proposition. Its falsity would also seem to follow from a second Fregean doctrine – that the sense of a grammatically compound expression E is a complex containing the senses of E’s parts. On this view, the sense of (1) is a complex the constituents of which are the senses of the subject expression ‘Jesus’ and the predicate expression ‘a man’ (ignoring the copula). By parity of reasoning, the sense of (2) should be a complex consisting of the senses of the subject expression ‘Jesus’, the grammatical object ‘the concept *man*’ and the relational predicate ‘falls under’. Since the senses of (1) and (2) contain different constituents, as well as having different structures, it should follow that (1) and (2) don’t mean the same thing.<sup>5</sup> This is how Frege reasons in other cases. Consistency suggests it is how he should reason here.<sup>6</sup> That he doesn’t is, I suspect, simply a matter of the attachment he feels to his proposed solution to the problem of propositional unity. This attachment is no argument for P1. Since the role of P1 is to support his solution, that fact that P1 has no independent support means that Argument 1 fails.

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<sup>5</sup> See his discussion of the senses of A and  $[\sim \sim A]$  in “Negation.

<sup>6</sup> See pp. 14-18 of Jeff King, *The Nature and Structure of Content*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2007, for discussion of the tension generated by Frege’s different remarks on this point, and the problems for his central doctrines posed by his claim that one and the same proposition – e.g., the proposition supposedly expressed by both (1) and (2) – can be exhaustively analyzed both into a unity of lower-order constituents and into a unity of different lower and higher-order constituents.

Frege's failure to see this is connected to his conviction, expressed at the end of 'On Concept and Object', that no other solution to the problem of propositional unity is possible.

"Somebody may think that this is an artificially created difficulty; that there is no need at all to take account of such an unmanageable thing as what I call a concept; that one might ... regard an object's falling under a concept as a relation, in which the same thing could occur now as object, now as concept... This may be done; but anybody who thinks the difficulty is avoided in this way is very much mistaken; it is only shifted. **For not all the parts of a thought can be complete; at least one must be 'unsaturated', or predicative; otherwise they would not hold together.** For example, the sense of 'the number 2' does not hold together with that of the expression 'the concept *prime number*' without a link. We apply such a link in the sentence 'the number 2 falls under the concept *prime number*'; it is contained in **the words** 'falls under,' which need to be completed in two ways – by a subject and an accusative; and **only because their sense is thus 'unsaturated' are they capable of serving as this link.**... I say that such words or phrases stand for a relation. We now get the same difficulty for the relation that we were trying to avoid for the concept. For the words 'the relation of an object to the concept it falls under' designates not a relation but an object; and **the three proper names 'the number 2', 'the concept *prime number*', 'the relation of an object to a concept it falls under', hold aloof from one another just as much as the first two do by themselves; however we put them together we get no sentence.** It is thus easy for us to see that the difficulty arising from the 'unsaturatedness' of one part of the thought can indeed be shifted, but not avoided."<sup>7</sup>

In this passage there is a striking contrast between the boldness of the thesis advanced, and the slenderness of the argument for it. The thesis advanced is that every proposition must contain an unsaturated sense – i.e. something which neither itself, nor that which it determines as referent, can be designated by any singular term. The argument for this is a supposedly obvious observation: since no sequence of singular terms constitutes a sentence, no structure of saturated senses of such terms constitutes a proposition – since in it, nothing would be predicated of anything else. However, this supposedly obvious observation is a *non-sequitor*.

Consider an obvious non-Fregean analysis of the simple example (4), understood as containing the lexical items *John* and *human* as constituents, plus the copula *is*.

4. [<sub>S</sub> [<sub>N</sub> John] [<sub>VP</sub> is [<sub>ADJ</sub> human]]]

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 54-55, my emphasis.

The copula is here regarded merely as part of grammatical structure – something needed to form a sentence, which is not itself a sense-bearing unit. The proposition expressed by (4) is taken to contain just two constituents: the sense of ‘John’ – which either is, or determines, the man John - - and the sense of ‘human’ – which either is, or determines, the property *humanity*. Both of these may be referents of singular terms, and so qualify as complete in Frege’s sense, provided that something about the proposition indicates that, in it, humanity is predicated of John. This propositional something is not itself a propositional constituent. Instead, the fact that the sense of ‘human’ stands in a certain structural relation to the sense of ‘John’ in the proposition is what indicates that, in it, humanity is predicated of John. The constituents of a sentence provide the constituents of the proposition expressed. The grammatical structure of the sentence provides the propositional structure that indicates what is predicated of what. Since Frege does nothing to rule this out, he fails to establish his doctrines about incomplete senses and referents.

This is all to the good, since these doctrines cause nothing but problems. Consider, for example, his account of quantification, illustrated by his discussion of (5a).

5a. There is at least one square root of 4.

Frege says that in this sentence “we have an assertion...about a concept, *square root of 4*; viz. that it is not empty.”<sup>8</sup> This analysis of quantification is rendered incoherent by his incompleteness doctrines. The analysis tells us that (5a) asserts something about a concept. The incompleteness doctrines tell us that since *the subject of this assertion* is a concept, it can’t be the referent of a singular term. This is self-refuting, since we have just made the concept the referent of the term, ‘the subject of this assertion’. Notice also Frege’s use of “it” in his specification of what is asserted – namely, “that it is not empty.” Since ‘it’ here functions as a grammatical

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 49.

subject, it is a Fregean proper name. Thus, his incompleteness doctrines compel him to deny that its referent is a concept, while his analysis of quantification requires him to affirm that it is one.

Here is the larger text in which Frege's self-refuting remark is embedded.

**“In the sentence [(5a)] we have an assertion...about a concept, *square root of 4*; viz. that it is not empty.** But if I express the same thought thus: ‘The concept *square root of 4* is realized’ then the first six words form the proper name of an object, and it is about this object that something is asserted. But notice carefully that what is asserted here is not the same thing as was asserted about the concept.”<sup>9</sup>

In this passage, Frege tells us that the proposition expressed by (5a) can correctly be taken in two ways: (i) as asserting (i.e. predicating) of a certain concept (which is the referent of ‘square root of 4’) that it’s not empty, (ii) as asserting (predicating) of a certain object (which is the referent of ‘the concept *square root of 4*’) that it “is realized.” Whatever the mysterious difference between *being non-empty* (predicated of the concept) and *being realized* (predicated of the object) is supposed to be, the doctrine is self-refuting. For Frege is committed to identifying the concept that is the subject of the first assertion as the referent of the singular terms, ‘the subject of the first assertion’, and ‘the referent of ‘square root of 4’.

Although the quoted passage continues, it doesn’t get any better.

“Language has means of presenting now one, now another, part of the thought as the subject. It need not then surprise us that the same sentence may be conceived as an assertion about a concept and also as an assertion about an object; only we must observe that what is asserted is different. In the sentence [(5a)] it is impossible to replace the words ‘square root of 4’ by ‘the concept *square root of 4*’; i.e. **the assertion that suits the concept does not suit the object.**”<sup>10</sup>

Here Frege points out that whereas (5a) expresses a proposition that can be used to make an assertion about a concept, (5b) does not.

5b. There is at least one the concept *square root of 4*.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 49, my emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 49, my emphasis.

For Frege, (5b) isn't well-formed, because the sense of the quantifier requires completion by the sense of a predicate, rather than by the sense of a Fregean proper name. As usual, he ignores the possibility that the ill-formedness of (5b) is a *grammatical* violation, and that the reason (5b) doesn't express a proposition is that it lacks a grammatical structure the propositional contribution of which would indicate that the higher-order concept given by the quantifier is to be predicated of the referent of the grammatical predicate. Since Frege ignores this explanation of the substitution facts, his observations *don't* show that his analysis, in terms of unsaturated senses, is correct. He also continues his pattern of self-refutation when he sums up the supposed lesson by saying that the assertion made by (5a) that suits the concept – which he takes to be *the referent of 'square root of 4'* – does not suit the object which is supposedly correlated with it. This is self-refuting since the Fregean proper name 'the referent of 'square root of 4'' is obviously coreferential with the predicate 'square root of 4'.

Frege completes the passage as follows:

“Although our sentence [(5a)] does not present **the concept** as a subject, it asserts something about it [the concept]; **it can be regarded as expressing the fact that a concept falls under a higher one.**”<sup>11</sup>

Here we get a third way of taking proposition (5a) – as asserting (predicating) of the concept designated by the predicate that it has the relational property of falling under the higher-order concept designated by the quantifier. This, too, is incoherent since it requires the subject of the assertion to be both a *concept*, and the *object* indicated by the subject of (5c).

5c. The concept *square root of 4* falls under H (where 'H' designates the relevant higher-order concept).

In sum, Frege's doctrines of unsaturatedness and incompleteness are neither established by his arguments, nor the solution to any coherent problem about the unity of the proposition. Instead,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 49, my emphasis.

they are themselves the self-refuting source of serious problems. As we will see, there is an important philosophical difficulty lurking in the background of Frege's discussion. However, he hasn't identified it, let alone solved it.

## **Russell**

In *Principles of Mathematics*, Russell addresses similar concerns.<sup>12</sup> Like Frege, he takes the meaning of a predicate expression to play the key role in unifying the proposition. However, he rejects Frege's idea that predicate meanings are different in kind from other constituents of the proposition. Instead he distinguishes *the way predicate meanings occur in propositions in which they are used predicatively* from the way they occur in propositions in which something is predicated of them. He says:

"Terms which are concepts differ from those which are not, not in respect of self-subsistence, but in virtue of the fact that, in certain true or false propositions, they occur in a manner which is different in an indefinable way from the manner in which subjects or terms of relations occur."<sup>13</sup>

The sentences in (6) illustrate Russell's distinction.

- 6a. Socrates is human.
- b. Socrates exemplifies humanity.

According to Russell, the property humanity occurs in both propositions, but it does so in different ways. In (6a), it is what is asserted, or predicated, of Socrates, who is the individual the proposition is about. In Russell's terminology, Socrates occurs in this proposition *as a term*, whereas humanity doesn't. Since this is the only way Socrates can occur in a proposition, he counts as *a thing*. Because humanity can occur other than as a subject of predication, it counts as *a concept*. However, Russell maintains, everything can occur as a term in some proposition – as humanity does in proposition (6b).

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<sup>12</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Mathematics*, (New York: Norton), originally published 1903.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

“In [6a], the notion expressed by *human* occurs in a different way from that in which it occurs when it is called *humanity*, the difference being that in the latter case, but not in the former, the proposition is *about* this notion. This indicates that humanity is a concept, and not a thing.”<sup>14</sup>

In this respect, Russell’s view is an advance over Frege’s.

However, Russell goes on to say something puzzling.

“Thus, we shall say that ‘Socrates is human’ is a proposition having only one term; of the remaining components of the proposition, one is the verb, the other is a *predicate*.”<sup>15</sup>

The term is Socrates, and the predicate is humanity. What is the verb? Russell returns to this point a few pages later with the following difficult remarks.

“It may be asked whether everything that, in the logical sense we are concerned with, is a verb, expresses a relation or not. It seems plain that, if we were right in holding that [6a] is proposition having only one term, **the *is* in this proposition cannot express a relation in the ordinary sense**...Nevertheless, a relation between Socrates and humanity is certainly *implied*, and it is very difficult to conceive the proposition as expressing no relation at all. We may perhaps say that **it is a relation**, although it is distinguished from other relations in that **it does not permit itself to be regarded as an assertion concerning either of its terms indifferently, but only as an assertion concerning the referent**.”<sup>16</sup>

These remarks are confused. Russell should have said that proposition (6a) has two constituents, Socrates and humanity, the latter of which is predicated of the former. Although the proposition doesn’t contain a third constituent relating the two, such a relation is implied, in the sense the truth of the proposition requires Socrates to bear the exemplification relation to humanity.

Russell gets in another tangle in his discussion of verbs and verbal nouns.

“It is plain that the concept that occurs in the verbal noun is the very same as that which occurs as verb... But ... there is a further point. By transforming the verb as it occurs in a proposition [as concept, rather than as term], into a verbal noun, the whole proposition can be turned into a single logical subject, **no longer asserted and no longer containing in itself truth or falsehood**. But here too, there seems to be no possibility of maintaining that the logical subject which results is a different entity from the proposition. “Caesar died” and “the death of Caesar” will illustrate this point.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 49, my emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 48, my emphasis.

The problem Russell poses, about assertion, is illuminating, but the example chosen to illustrate it is unfortunate, since, on one interpretation, ‘the death of Caesar’ denotes an event, not a proposition. In order to keep confusion to a minimum, it will be useful contrast ‘Caesar died’ with ‘that Caesar died’ instead. The passage continues:

“If we ask: What is asserted in the proposition “Caesar died”? the answer must be “the death of Caesar is asserted.” [Better: *that Caesar died* is asserted.] In that case, it would seem, it is the death of Caesar which is true or false [Better: *that Caesar died* is true or false]; **and yet neither truth or falsehood belongs to a mere logical subject...There appears to be an ultimate notion of assertion, given by the verb, which is lost as soon as we substitute a verbal noun, and is lost when the proposition in question is made the subject of some proposition.**”<sup>18</sup>

The air of mystery here is markedly diminished, if the examples in question are related as in (7).

- 7a. Caesar died.
- b. That Caesar died is widely believed.

Although this is not a case involving a verb and a verbal noun (‘die’ and ‘death’), it is a case in which the proposition expressed by one sentence is what Russell calls “the logical subject” of the proposition expressed by another sentence. When applied to (7) Russell’s comment that “neither truth or falsehood belongs to a mere logical subject” is clearly without merit, since the logical subject of (7b) is the true proposition that Caesar died.

It is, of course, correct that when one proposition is the logical subject of another assertion of the latter, needn’t involve assertion of the former. But why is this worth noting? You would think it worth noting if you thought that assertion, to put it sloppily, is a feature needed to distinguish any proposition from a mere collection of its constituents. For then, the lack of assertion of the logical subject of (7b) would threaten Russell’s account of the unity of proposition (7a). Regrettably, Russell did speak and think in this way -- as indicated by his remark that “in every proposition...we may make an analysis into something asserted and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 48, my emphasis.

something about which the assertion is made.”<sup>19</sup> Strictly speaking, this remark is false. However, one can easily see what is wanted – namely that in every proposition we may make an analysis into *something predicated*, and *something of which it is predicated*. Though related, predicating and asserting are different. When we assert proposition (7a), we both predicate dying of Caesar, and assert of him that he died. However, when we assert (7b) we only do the former. It is predication that is central to Russell’s account of the unity of the proposition, not assertion.

This brings us to what is probably his most famous remark on the subject.

**"Consider, for example, the proposition A differs from B. The constituents of this proposition, if we analyze it, appear to be only A, difference, B. 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, whereas the difference after analysis is a notion which has no connection with A and B. It may be said that we ought, in the analysis, to mention the relations which difference has to A and B, relations which are expressed by *is* and *from* when we say A is different from B. These relations consist in the fact that A is referent and B relatum with respect to difference. But A, referent, difference, relatum, B, is still merely a list of terms, not a proposition. A proposition, in fact, is essentially a unity, and when analysis has destroyed the unity, no enumeration of constituents will restore the proposition. The verb, when used as a verb, embodies the unity of the proposition, and is thus distinguishable from the verb considered as a term, though I do not know how to give a clear account of the precise nature of the distinction.”**<sup>20</sup>

Again, Russell’s point is clearer than the mystery surrounding his remarks. His point is that there is more to the proposition *that A differs from B* than the fact that its constituents are A, B, and difference.<sup>21</sup> The relation these elements bear to one another in the proposition is also crucial. In the proposition difference is *predicated* of A and B, with the result that they are *represented as being different*. In a mere list, nothing is *predicated* of anything, and so the list doesn’t

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 49-50/

<sup>21</sup> Russell also makes this point on p. 52, where he says: ““Owing to the way in which the verb actually relates the terms of a proposition, every proposition has a unity which renders it distinct from the sum of its constituents.” It follows that no analysis of a proposition into its constituents can be complete unless it specifies how those constituents occur in a way that explains how the proposition represents them to be.

*represent* the items listed as being one way rather than another. One might ask what we mean by ‘predication’ – what, in effect, the analysis of predication is. It’s unclear that an informative answer can be given. It is equally unclear that this is anything to worry about. Some logical and semantic notions – like negation – are primitive. Since this doesn’t provoke hand-wringing, it’s hard to see why the primitiveness of predication should. One might ask what, in a proposition, *shows* what is being predicated of what. At a general level, the answer is obvious. Just as it is the structural relations holding among the syntactic constituents of a sentence that show how they are to be understood, so it is the structural relations holding among the constituents of the proposition expressed by a sentence that show what it predicates of what.

### **The Real Problem**

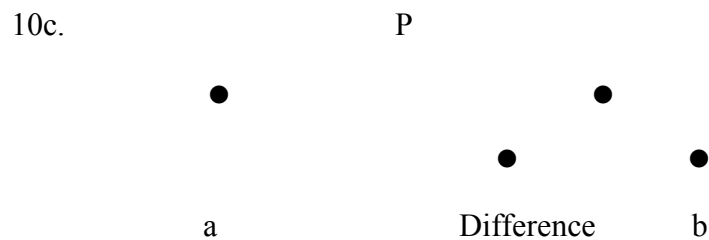
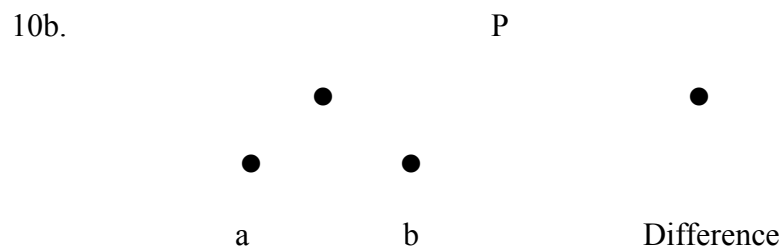
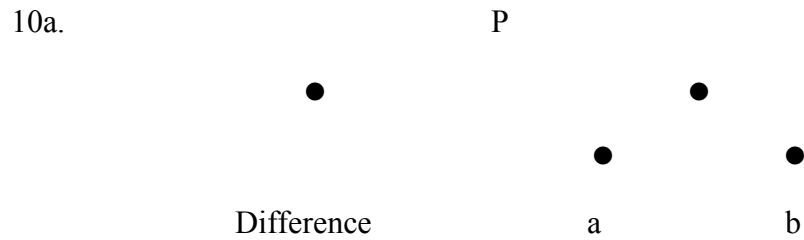
However, there is still a problem to be solved. What structural features of a proposition do show what is predicated of what, and how do they do that? Consider the proposition expressed by (8), the constituents of which are *a*, *difference*, and *b*.

8. A is different from B.

In this proposition, the *difference* relation is predicated of *a* and *b*. What feature of the proposition shows this? Consider some candidates for being that proposition.

- 9a. < difference, <a,b> >
- b. { difference, {difference, { a, {a, b}}}}
- c. < <a,b>, difference >
- d. { { a, {a, b}}, {{ a, {a, b}}, difference } }
- e. < difference, <b,a> >
- f. { difference, {difference, { b, {b, a}}}}
- g. < <b,a>, difference >
- h. { { b, {b, a}}, {{ b, {b, a}}, difference } }

Any of these candidates can be used as a formal model of the proposition expressed by (8), as can any number of tree structures, a few of which are pictured in (10).



The problem is not that there is no determinate answer to the question which of these structures is the proposition expressed by (8). The problem is that it is hard to see how *any of them*, or any other structure, could be that proposition. The proposition expressed by (8) is something that *represents a as being different from b* – by virtue of the fact that the *difference* relation is predicated of them. But there is nothing in any of these abstract structures which, by its very nature, indicates that anything is being predicated of anything. Hence, there is nothing in these structures that makes them representational, and so capable of being true or false.

We *could*, if we wanted, adopt rules that would allow us to read off the needed information about predication from the structures, and so *interpret* them. To do this would be to *endow* the structures with representational meaning or content, thereby making them bearers of truth and falsity. However, it would not make them propositions in the Frege-Russell sense. For Frege and Russell, propositions are not things that *have meanings*, or *get interpretations* from us. Rather, they *are* the meanings we assign to sentences, formulas, and the like, when we interpret them. The real problem posed by Frege's and Russell's confused discussions of "the unity of the proposition" is that the answer to the question "*What makes propositions representational, and hence capable of being used to interpret sentences and provide their meanings?*" violates a fundamental feature of what they took propositions to be. If by 'propositions' we mean what Frege and Russell meant, then there are no propositions.

### **A Proposed Solution**

However, this isn't the end of the story. There's another way of thinking about propositions in which they can be taken to be meanings of sentences, bearers of truth value, and objects of the attitudes. I will close with the briefest of sketches. We retain the idea that propositions are structured complexes, the constituents of which are objects and properties. To say that certain constituents make up a complex is to say that, in it, the constituents stand in certain relations to one another. The complex is, in effect, the standing of the constituents in those relations. What these relations are depend on the specific abstract structures we take propositions to be. For our purposes, this matter of detail doesn't matter. Suffice it to say that the proposition expressed by (8) is a complex in which  $a$ ,  $b$  and the difference relation stand in a certain relation  $R$ . How does it come about that this entity –  $a$ 's and  $b$ 's standing in  $R$  to difference -- *represents*  $a$  as being different from  $b$ ? The answer rests not on anything intrinsic

to R, or to the structure that contains it, but on the interpretation we place on R, and thereby on the structure as a whole. Our use of R is such that for a and b to stand in R to difference is for us to take the proposition as representing a as different from b.

Though abstractly expressed, the idea is commonplace. Take maps, for example. On my map, the dot labeled 'Los Angeles' is (roughly) two inches below and  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch to the right of the dot labeled 'San Francisco'. The standing of these dots in this spatial relation on the map *represents* the city Los Angeles as being (roughly) 320 miles south and 80 miles east of the city San Francisco. It does so, in part, because of the interpretation we give to the relation *being two inches below and half an inch to the right of* on the map. This is analogous to interpretation we give the propositional relation R, in interpreting the complex in which a and b stand in R to difference. In both cases -- the map and the proposition -- our interpretation of a relation that the constituents of a structure stand in is what endows the structure with representational properties, and hence, truth conditions. A proposition, like a map, is something we interpret.

The idea behind this conception comes from *The Tractatus*.<sup>22</sup> For Wittgenstein, propositions are sentences we use a certain way, and sentences are complexes in which words and phrases stand in certain structural relations. For example, sentence (8) is the standing of the name 'A' and the name 'B' in a certain grammatical relation to the predicate expression 'differs from'. Call this sentential relation  $R_s$ . Following Wittgenstein, we interpret  $R_s$  as predicating the relation indicated by the predicate expression, of the objects represented by its arguments -- thereby bringing it about that sentence (8) represents a as differing from b.

Have propositions become superfluous? No. We still need them to play the roles of what synonymous sentences have in common, and of what we assert and believe by uttering and

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<sup>22</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1922. For a brief discussion of Wittgenstein's theory of propositions (interpreted sentences), see pp. 215-16 of volume 1 of my *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 2003.

accepting sentences. Synonymous sentences may be in the same, or different, languages. They may differ in vocabulary, and in some aspects of superficial syntactic structure. But if they express the same proposition, then utterances of them “say the same thing,” and express the same belief.<sup>23</sup> To assert a proposition is to assertively utter, inscribe, or produce some sentence or other representation that expresses it. A similar point holds for beliefs and other (non-perceptual) attitudes. To bear such an attitude toward a proposition is to bear a more basic relation to a propositional vehicle that expresses it. In taking this position, we abandon Frege’s and Russell’s platonic epistemology of propositions.

What, on this account, is it for an abstract structure, like (10a), to count as the proposition that a differs from b? It is for us to *use* that structure to *predicate* difference of a and b. What is it for us to do that? It is, very roughly, for us to use the grammatical structure of some sentence or other representation, the semantic contents of the constituents of which are a, b, and difference, to predicate the latter of the former. In these cases, the representational properties of propositions are grounded in, and explained by, the representational properties of sentences, and *not the other way around*. On this conception of propositions, the unity of the proposition is no problem at all. The real problem is in explaining how, precisely, our use of the abstract structures that are propositions – in terms of our use of related syntactic structures that express them -- endow them with representational properties.<sup>24</sup>

The problem is complicated by the fact that there is a kind of perceptual propositional attitude we can bear to a proposition that is not mediated by a propositional vehicle. When I see

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<sup>23</sup> Here, and throughout, I suppress complications due to indexicality, and other kinds of context sensitivity. Though highly relevant to the working out of specific examples, they don’t affect the shape of the overall picture.

<sup>24</sup> This problem is illuminatingly discussed by Jeffrey C. King in *The Nature and Structure of Content*. Though our views about its solution differ on important specifics, our approaches have a good deal in common. I am indebted to him for pressing the problem on me at a time when I was – and, by the strength of my initial resistance, apparently wished to remain -- blissfully unaware of it.

an object *o* as *being red*, I typically see both *o* and the color, which is a kind of property. Since perception is a form of cognition, my perceptual experience involves my *predicating* the color of the object. I don't, in virtue of this, *see* the proposition that *o* is red. However, since this proposition is part of the content of my perceptual state, I do bear a propositional attitude toward it. What counts as bearing this attitude is simply that my perceptual experience involves the predication we use the proposition to represent. In both the perceptual and the linguistic case, the explanation of what is predicated of what in the proposition bottoms out in predication as a cognitive activity of agents – in one case, in the way agents treat, or interpret, different *perceived* propositional constituents, in the other case, in the way they treat, or interpret, different linguistic representatives of those constituents.

Obviously, many details of this picture remain to be filled in. As challenging as this may be, the view itself neither presents us with paradox, nor requires us to do without propositions in semantics, the philosophy of language, or the philosophy of mind. The final conception of propositions we end up with is, of course, quite different both from the classical conceptions of Frege and the early Russell, and from the later, eliminativist, view of Russell's multiple-relation theory of judgment. Our conception is, however, analogous to the latter in one respect. Whereas the multiple-relation theory takes the role of agents to be crucial in *unifying* the constituents of judgments, the view suggested here takes them to be crucial in *endowing* propositions with the *representational* properties that allow them to serve as objects of judgment, and other attitudes.