

## *Propositions*

Most of us agree that the same thing can be said in many languages, and even expressed in a number of ways within a single language. If so, then a proposition is the ‘thing’ which is expressed in these various ways. Philosophers aim to understand the world, and also to understand *how* we understand the world, and the concept of a ‘proposition’ is a major focal point of the second aim. So it is not surprising that there are diverse views about the nature of propositions, and also that some **sceptics** reject their existence. The main sceptical view is that different linguistic expressions do *not* say the same thing, even within a language, and that perfect translation between languages is impossible. Hence there is no shared ‘thing’ to explain, and propositions can be dismissed as groups of short sentences which are agreed to be indistinguishable. Most philosophers, however, believe in propositions.

The introduction of propositions into philosophy was driven by a quest for logical proofs. Ordinary language is vague, ambiguous, and full of weird poetry. Logical proofs work with clear and precise statements, which can be formalised algebraically. Hence there developed the idea of finding the unambiguous ‘logical form’ of an ordinary sentence. Once that was found, it was realised that it might have been expressed in a number of ways. Hence the earliest view of propositions is as **logical forms**. If propositions are used in proofs, they must be ‘truth apt’ – that is, capable of being either true or false – and this is seen as the key property of a proposition. In order to be truth apt, they must make complete statements about some topic, and so they need to be unified. This leads to a first dispute on their nature: is a proposition intrinsically unified, or is it unified by the person who thinks about it? If a proposition is intrinsically unified, presumably its ingredients naturally coalesce into a unique **unity**. If minds unify propositions, presumably analysis into parts is possible, and the parts could be rearranged.

Within any agreed system of logic (such as ‘classical’ logic) any group of propositions will have logical implications. Some of these implications will be obvious, but many others will be valid inferences which may never occur to anyone, because we can’t be bothered to do the proof. This leads to the next controversy, because it implies the existence of propositions which have never been thought by anyone. Propositions were devised to explain what people were trying to express, but their existence may have nothing to do with people. So are propositions a feature of thought, or **a feature of reality?**

The strongest account of propositions in reality says that every aspect of existence has a proposition which expresses it, so they amount to the totality of ideas about the world. Each of the true propositions presumably also has a negated (and false) version, doubling the already vast total. We can think of these propositions as existing **abstract** entities (like numbers, perhaps), or we could think of them as possibilities. The propositions can’t be the same as facts or states of affairs, because denials of these are also propositions. This family of self-subsistent propositions not only helps our account of logical proof, but also clarifies communication, in which two people fully understand one another (because they share a single objective proposition) even if their mode of expression is a bit muddled.

The idea that propositions have an independent abstract existence does not appeal to empiricists or physicalist very much, so a variant of the view places the reality of propositions (or at least their main ingredients) in the **physical** world. Thus the proposition ‘the cat is on the mat’ contains the actual cat and actual mat as ingredients, and the proposition is their related situation (rather than an abstract idea *about* their situation). The negative version of the sentence would be false, but with the same ingredients. This account gives a securely grounded picture of propositions, but undermines the correspondence theory of truth, which needs the proposition to be independent of the corresponding fact. The account also struggles with necessary truths, and assertions of non-existence.

Since propositions are possible truths or falsehoods, the view of propositions as external to minds has been expressed in terms of **possible worlds**. In some worlds the cat is on the mat, and in others it isn’t. Thus there is a set of possible worlds where the cat is enmatted, and so the proposition is the set of worlds where this is true. What we normally call the ‘meaning’ of the sentence is what picks out the appropriate possible worlds. In this view a proposition is simply true or false in each world, and there is no internal structure to propositions, which fits the abstract view of them, rather than the view that they contain physical ingredients. There are difficulties with two propositions that pick out the same set of worlds, and a set of worlds doesn’t seem to be ‘true’, so this theory misses some aspect of propositions, despite giving a very successful mechanism for modal reasoning.

All of these views are influenced by logic, but propositions have a role in accounting for ordinary communication. If we write ‘she said that...’, the reported remark must give the meaning, but doesn’t need the actual words, which points to a proposition. When good communication occurs, two people end up with the same thought, even after they have forgotten the words used. We can’t focus only on the words used, because ‘Adam ate the apple’ can be at least four propositions, depending on which word is emphasised. Speakers of diverse language can have the same beliefs, and a dog might share a belief with a human (e.g. that some food is inedible). Introspection suggests that speech needs a sense of what is to be said, before the words for it are found, and we all experience *trying* to say something, but not finding the right words.

This points to a more **psychological** account of propositions. In particular, we see that propositions concern **beliefs**, and not just sentences, and no one thinks that our innumerable beliefs are all stored linguistically. We may think in French, but no one believes in French. We not only share beliefs with other people, but also compare our private beliefs, seeking coherent judgements, and ‘proposition’ looks like the best word for these beliefs, since they often never reach verbal form. Even absurd or self-contradictory propositions can be believed. Cognitive science (as well as logic) finds propositions useful in explanations. There is an animal-like way of representing experience in memory, which leads to beliefs, which can eventually be linguistically expressed. Since events in the mind can have causal powers, this approach has an advantage over treating propositions as abstract, because they can explain behaviour. How physical these mental propositions are depends on your theories about the mind.