Against Propositionalism

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Abstract

‘Propositionalism’ is the widely held view that all intentional mental relations—all intentional attitudes—are relations to propositions or something proposition-like. Paradigmatically, to think about the mountain is ipso facto to think that it is \( F \), for some predicate ‘\( F \)’. It seems, however, many intentional attitudes are not relations to propositions at all: Mary contemplates Jonah, adores New York, misses Athens, mourns her brother. I argue, following Brentano, Husserl, Church and Montague among others, that the way things seem is the way they are, and that propositionalism must be abandoned.

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Propositionalism in the philosophy of mind is the view that every intentional attitude is a propositional attitude.\(^1\) On this view, every mental state or event (thought, belief, hope, fear, perception, etc.) that has an object, or is about something, or directed at something, either is or involves an attitude or relation to a proposition or something essentially proposition-like, something that is not just a particular physical object, say, or a particular property. To have an intentional attitude to anything, on this view, is to be related to something that is (so to say) essentially discursive in form, i.e. something whose nature can only be perspicuously conveyed by a verb-involving sentence. In its standard formulation, propositionalism is the view that for any intentional attitude \( \phi \), to be intentionally related to something, say Roger, is ipso facto to \( \phi \) that Roger is \( F \), for some property \( F \).

Propositionalism is widely accepted by analytic philosophers and semanticists, to the point where the expressions ‘intentional attitude’ and ‘propositional attitude’ are often used interchangeably. And yet it seems that many
intentional attitudes are what I will call objectual attitudes, meaning by this that they are attitudes to objects that are not propositions at all.

It may be said that propositionalism can easily embrace objectual attitudes, because one can have an intentional attitude to an object (such as Roger) that is not a proposition, and therefore have an objectual attitude, simply in having a propositional attitude. The present claim, however, is that there are irreducibly objectual attitudes, attitudes to objects that do not involve propositional attitudes in any way at all. This is how I will understand the term ‘objectual attitude’ in what follows.

As it stands, propositionalism is a straightforwardly metaphysical position in the philosophy of mind, a position about the nature of intentional states. It is often discussed in specifically linguistic terms, however, and in arguing that propositionalism is false I will follow common practice in taking it that consideration of semantic and linguistic matters may have direct bearing on the metaphysical issue.

In section 2 I review some of the reasons philosophers have held propositionalism. In section 3 I present the challenge: faced with the apparently non-propositional character of objectual attitudes, propositionalists must show that they really involve a proposition or a set of propositions. In section 4 I discuss a defense of propositionalism, based mainly on the attitude of desire, that appeals to syntactical evidence. I argue, first, that the syntactical evidence does not generalize to other attitudes, and go on in section 5 to argue that even if the propositionalist analysis of desire works, the existence of many if not all desires depend on the existence of more fundamental objectual pro-attitudes that cannot be given a propositional analysis. In sections 6 and 7 I consider various propositionalist analyses and argue that they are subject to convincing counterexamples. I put aside the case of ‘nonexistent objects’, although it is important in any general treatment of intentionality, because it is not a special problem for someone who seeks to question propositionalism.

Isn’t it obvious that propositionalism is false? Brentano, who originated the modern discussion of intentionality, does not endorse it. Nor does Husserl, and Dretske explicitly rejects it, albeit somewhat cautiously:

It may be, as some have argued, that we cannot know, remember, or perceive a thing without knowing, remembering, or perceiving some fact about that thing. According to this view, what we know, perceive, and remember is always propositional in character. I do not intend to quarrel with this view. I think it mistaken, but I do not have the time to argue the point here.

John Heil is also careful to leave room for doubt:

I may believe, hope, fear, or doubt that p, where p is some proposition. I prefer the label ‘intentional attitudes’ for these states of mind, leaving open whether all such attitudes are strictly propositional in character.
Propositionalism remains for all that the orthodoxy, the implicit default. It seems that many simply take it for granted, because it is convenient to their purposes, without really thinking it through. What usually happens in practice is that a philosopher introduces the topic of intentionality in suitably general terms, but then moves straight on to a discussion of propositional attitudes without any consideration of the question of whether there are non-propositional intentional attitudes.5

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John Perry offers an account of intentionality that takes it for granted that intentional attitudes are propositional attitudes:

The phenomenon of intentionality suggests that 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,6

and Daniel Stoljar also characterizes the problem of intentionality in terms of propositionalism:

In one formulation, the problem of intentionality is presented as concerning a particular class of properties, intentional properties. Intentional properties are those properties expressed by predicates formed from verbs of propositional attitudes.7

Noah Lemos explicitly advocates propositionalism for attitudes such as love, desire, and preference. “There is,” he says “reason to believe that the objects of such attitudes are not simply concrete, individual things, such as a dog, an apple, or a person, but more complex sorts of things,”8 and he offers, as examples of these more complex things, states of affairs and facts, which many take to be nothing other than propositions, and which I will accordingly include among the objects of the attitudes allowed by propositionalism.

George Bealer has argued for propositionalism in as much as he has claimed that taking propositions to be the objects of all intentional attitudes helps to explain the ‘aboutness’ of intentionality. ‘How does aboutness arise?’, he asks:

The answer is that it arises from propositional objects, i.e., from the thought to which a person stands in the relation of thought, belief, judgment, etc. After all, thoughts in the propositional sense are themselves things that are characteristically said to be about other objects.9

If this is right—if aboutness arises (only) from propositional objects—then propositionalism must be true.
Philosophers are attracted to propositionalism for a variety of reasons, among them the desire to give a satisfactory account of mental causation, to provide an adequate logic for reasoning, to solve certain puzzles in semantics, and to defend Russell’s Theory of Descriptions. Independently of these motivations, it is plain that intentional attitudes like thinking and believing are necessarily paired with propositions (Jonah believes that the earth is round, Solomon thinks that value is objective), and that the intentional attitude of desire is also very naturally paired with a proposition (Mary desires to (that she) win the race). And since these are central, paradigm cases of intentional attitudes, it seems an intuitive inductive step to claim that all attitudes should be construed as relations to propositions.

As for more theoretical considerations, David Lewis (1979) is not himself committed to propositionalism, but he offers support for it by demonstrating its possible role in explaining mental causation. As he remarks, the phenomenon of mental causation implicates intentional attitudes in several ways—they cause behavior, they are caused by the environment, and they cause one another—and when one theorizes about their causal roles it is sometimes necessary to refer to the logical relations between their objects. Since the logic of propositions is well-established, it will be clear how to capture these entailments if the objects of the attitudes are propositions. If, however, they form a miscellaneous class, it will be far less clear how to proceed.

A further motivation for propositionalism is the desire to give an adequate theory of reasoning. As reasoners, we make inferences from premises to conclusions, and logic is plausibly characterized as the study and formalization of valid inferences. Aristotelian logic captured valid inferences between four basic types of propositions on the basis of the terms the propositions contained (this is why Aristotelian logic is sometimes called ‘term logic’), but there is no obvious way of capturing certain inferences between propositions simply by appealing to their constitutive terms, and so Aristotelian logic proved inadequate as a general model of reasoning. The schemas \( \text{If } P \text{ then } Q, P, \text{ therefore } Q \) and \( P \text{ or } Q, \sim Q, \text{ therefore } P \), for example, represent inferences between propositions which are most naturally captured without any reference to the internal parts of the propositions \( P \) and \( Q \). So if logic is the study of good reasoning, and humans are reasoners, it seems that we do a better job capturing our reasoning if we can appeal to truth-functional relations between propositions.\(^{10}\)

Propositionalism has also been appealed to to solve certain problems of ambiguity. Intentional attitudes with non-propositional objects give rise to well known ‘notional/relational’ ambiguities which can be explained in terms of scope permutations if intentional attitudes have propositional objects.\(^{11}\) Connectedly, non-propositional attitudes have been used as a way of arguing that Russell’s Theory of Descriptions assigns incorrect truth conditions in these cases. If, however, intentional attitudes have propositional objects then this objection can once again be dealt with by the use of scope permutations.\(^{12}\)
Finally, some propositionalists claim that belief and desire are somehow basic, as intentional attitudes, and that they are always plausibly construed as relations to propositions. Clearly, if the intentionality of all attitudes can be reduced to sets of belief and desire, and if it is correct to say that desire is always and only a propositional attitude, then all intentional attitudes will be relations to propositions. Searle makes just this kind of move in attempting to account for intentional attitudes that do not appear to be relations to propositions (using ‘Bel’ and ‘Des’ as terms for the two purportedly basic intentional attitudes of belief and desire):

But what about those states that apparently do not require whole propositions as contents, such as love, hate, and admiration? Even these cases involve sets of beliefs and desires. Many cases which apparently don’t have a direction of fit, and thus apparently don’t have conditions of satisfaction, contain beliefs and desires which have directions of fit and conditions of satisfaction. Joy and sorrow, for example, are feelings that don’t reduce to Bel and Des but as far as their Intentionality is concerned, they have no intentionality in addition to Bel and Des; in each case, their Intentionality is a form of desire, given certain beliefs.

There are, then, several versions of propositionalism. The simplest, asserts that all intentional attitudes just are relations to propositions: this is what each intentional attitude turns out to be when properly analyzed. This version does not reduce all intentional attitudes, or at least the intentionality of all intentional attitudes, to beliefs and desires; it allows that loving, hating, admiring, imagining, and so on are irreducible intentional attitudes. According to the second, Searlean version intentional attitudes like joy, sorrow, love and hate are distinct attitudes, each with its own distinctive feeling-character, but the intentionality of these attitudes reduces wholly to the intentionality of Bel and Des (sets of beliefs and desires). According to a third, mixed version love, hate and so on are irreducible intentional attitudes, but their proper analysis will always involve reference to other propositional attitudes as well.

I have outlined the main idea behind a propositionalist approach to the attitudes and listed some reasons for which philosophers have held it. In this section, I want to raise a well-known problem, and point out how it shapes the project of propositionalism.

Simply put, objectual attitudes resist a propositionalist analysis. Mary loves Nancy. She seeks the fountain of youth. She has you in mind. She contemplates the sky. And she wants Nancy’s car. These intentional attitudes appear to be relations that hold simply between thinkers and non-propositional objects, rather than between thinkers and propositions, and we need to be given some reason to think otherwise. The burden of argument is plainly on the propositionalists.
What strategies are open to them? Some, working in a linguistic framework, seek to provide syntactical evidence that implicit propositions are really in place after all in the case of sentences like ‘She contemplates the sky’, the presence of such propositions being revealed in the analysis of the true meaning of such sentences. Others may attempt to provide directly metaphysical analyses of seemingly objectual intentional attitudes in terms of propositional attitudes, ideally offering necessary and sufficient conditions for any given attitude.

Let me first consider the syntactical approach proposed by den Dikken, Larson, and Ludlow (1996) and Larson (2002). Their strongest case concerns what they call the ‘wants/needs’ verb group. They observe that attaching an adverb to an objectual-attitude report containing such an appetitional verb produces a semantic ambiguity, and argue that the ambiguity can be explained by postulating a covert predicate together with a covert complement clause. Thus attaching ‘tomorrow’ to (1) *John will want a hippogriff* produces (2) *John will want a hippogriff tomorrow*, which is ambiguous between two readings. Either John will want a hippogriff in his possession tomorrow, or a want for a hippogriff will arise in John tomorrow although he will be flexible about when he actually gets the hippogriff. This ambiguity can be accounted for by postulating a covert predicate in (2), thus obtaining the propositionalist structure (3) *John will want that he have a hippogriff tomorrow*. By making the verb ‘have’ explicit, the ambiguity can be accounted for in terms of which verb the adverb ‘tomorrow’ modifies. Those who defend propositionalism as a thesis in the metaphysics of mind argue that this supports the view that the intentional attitudes in question are really propositional attitudes.

Let us accept that this sort of linguistic evidence can be allowed in support of the metaphysical thesis of propositionalism. We may then ask how much support this particular argument provides. The answer, I think, is very little. This syntactical evidence is limited to the ‘wants/needs’ verb group and does not generalize, for most objectual attitudes do not exhibit this ambiguity. Desire is commonly described as desiring that the world turn out in such a way that the desire is satisfied, and since ‘ways that the world can be’ intuitively designates states of affairs, this gives us a plausible explanation of why verbs of desire naturally lend themselves to a propositionalist analysis. But this explanation simply does not apply in the case of objectual attitudes such as loving, hating, contemplating, considering, imagining, noticing and so on. So even if such syntactical evidence can be called in support of treating desires as propositional attitudes, the evidence does not apply to the majority of *prima facie* objectual attitudes.
It looks, furthermore, as if there are many cases in which desire is not a primitive intentional attitude, and depends for its existence on there being a fundamental pro-attitude—liking—that cannot be given a propositionalist analysis—in which case propositionalism is refuted even if syntactic evidence continues to support propositionalist analyses of desire. Taste preferences are a familiar example of what I have in mind: one just likes chocolate, brussel sprouts, Marmite, etc. The same goes for smell, colours, and combinations of colours. One may simply find another person sexually attractive, or not. In a museum, one may find oneself simply liking certain pieces.

One cannot say (seeking a proposition) that liking chocolate is wanting or desiring to have it (that one has it), because that leaves out a crucial explanatory connection. It leaves out the fact that one wants to have chocolate because one likes it. Desires of this kind flow from, or are a consequence of, more primitive attitudes of liking, and could not exist at all if primitive liking did not exist. It is true that one could desire chocolate without liking it if one wanted to gain weight; and one could want to gain weight because of a desire to be more like one’s partner. But at the end of any such chain there must always be primitive liking of one thing or another.

The point is similar to Bishop Butler’s point about the desire for happiness: if all one wants is happiness (and this is often said to be true of all human beings) then there is absolutely nothing one can do about it. One has to like something first. Only then can one hope to attain happiness in enjoyment of that thing. It is arguable that some primitive likings may have propositional objects—perhaps I just primitively like the state of affairs of being more like my partner—but vast, chocolatey numbers of them do not.

It may be doubted that all desires terminate in primitive likings—primitive pro-attitudes—even when it is granted that these can have propositional objects. What about the desire “that the Democrats make substantial gains in the mid-term congressional elections?” I think, in fact, that all desires will bottom out in primitive likings or pro-attitudes, but this is a matter for another time. For present purposes it is enough that some of them do.

If the existence of desire depends on the existence of an intentional attitude that cannot be given a propositionalist analysis, then propositionalism is dead even if desire itself can be given a propositionalist analysis. But I will now put this point aside and return to the traditional logico-linguistic framework of discussion.

Even if we allow that syntactic evidence of the sort adduced in section 4 can be directly relevant to the metaphysical question of whether propositionalism is true, it is hard to see how it can carry the day, as some propositionalists have seemed to hope. Propositionalists must therefore be more direct if they are
to make their case. What they need—what we need from them—is a principled way of analyzing all seemingly objectual, non-propositional intentional attitudes into propositional intentional attitudes.

Concrete examples of such analyses are, however, difficult to find; and this has provided propositionalism with impressive protection. For if what is required of it is an analysis of objectual attitudes into propositional attitudes, and no such analysis is offered in the literature, it is impossible to argue against it directly. My strategy will accordingly be to propose various propositionalist analyses and argue that they all face decisive counterexamples.

Plainly propositionalism must analyze every objectual attitude in terms of something with propositional structure. The principal propositional structures are (that) $a$ is $F$ and $a$'s being $F$, and Larson (2002) proposes a third type, claiming that the following non-propositional (non-sentential) constructions are really propositional (sentential) constructions:

Max wants [Boris (in his movie)]

Max is seeking [a vampire]

Max wants [PRO to have Boris in his movie]

Max is seeking [PRO to find a vampire].

The idea is that these apparently objectual attitudes typically correspond to a “nonfinite complement construction containing a ‘silent’ subject (PRO) and one of a small number of understood verbs,” the underlying form for ‘wants’ being $V$-to have-NP and the underlying form for ‘seeks’ being $V$-to-find-NP, and the propositionalist inference is that the attitudes of wanting and seeking have propositional objects.

Are ‘nonfinite complement constructions containing silent subjects’ propositional structures? I believe we must count them in. ‘Max wants [PRO to have Boris in his movie]’ is naturally understood as saying ‘Max wants (it to be the case) that he have Boris in his movie’ and ‘Max is seeking [PRO to find a vampire], although already somewhat peculiar as an analysis of ‘Max is seeking a vampire’, is naturally understood as saying ‘Max is seeking (wants it to be the case) that he find a vampire.’ In making these explicitly propositional, it seems most natural to construe them as involving ‘that’-clauses that correspond to, and are indeed equivalent to, the nonfinite complement constructions.

Following the ‘that’-clause lead, then, it seems that we may analyze Jonah loves Jane into Jonah loves that Jane is $F$ or Jonah loves Jane’s being $F$, and
analyze Jonah worships God into Jonah worships that God is F or Jonah worships God’s being F. But what is the F? The propositionalist must now tell us about the F-ness. Presumably it is either going to be something relatively specific like ‘is beautiful’ (Jonah loves that Jane is beautiful, Jane’s being beautiful?) or ‘is benevolent’ (Jonah worships that God is benevolent, God’s being benevolent?), or something essentially more general. But is either alternative plausible?

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A first attempt at providing a propositionalist analysis of objectual attitudes may appeal to propositional attitudes with relatively specific content. Suppose, by way of example that someone proposes to analyze (4) Jonah loves God as (5) Jonah loves God if and only if Jonah loves that God is omnipotent,23 endorsing the following general form of analysis:

\[ X \phi s Y \text{ if and only if } X \psi s \text{ that } Y \text{ is } F, \]

where ‘\( \phi \)’ and ‘\( \psi \)’ stand for intentional attitudes, \( \phi = \psi \), and ‘\( F \)’ is replaced by some predicate.24

The trouble with (5) is that the analysans does not provide a necessary condition for the analysandum. Although Jonah does love God, it is possible that he doesn’t love that God is omnipotent. He may not know what omnipotence is, or he may believe it is impossible for God to be omnipotent and he may detest impossible things. As far as I can see, this argument generalizes to defeat all attempts at providing analyses of objectual attitudes in terms of propositions with specific content.

It may seem that I am being unfair to the propositionalist by offering (5) as an analysis of (4). The analysis may seem too simple-minded to be taken seriously—and obviously incorrect. Nevertheless it serves a useful purpose. It points to a general problem with content-specific propositionalist analyses. As soon as such specific content is introduced the analysans will obviously fail to give a necessary condition for the attitude in question.

If the proposition that features in the analysans cannot contain a predicate with specific content, perhaps what is needed is an analysis that can somehow cover a wide range of possible contents or remain indifferent between them. How might such an analysis go? It may be suggested that \( X \text{ loves } Y \) is elliptical for \( X \text{ loves } (\text{something about}) \ Y \) which in turn has at least the following narrow and wide scope readings

[a] \( X \text{ loves that there is some property that } Y \text{ has, i.e. } X \text{ loves } [\exists F] (Y \text{ has } F) \) (narrow scope)

or

[b] there is some property such that \( X \text{ loves that } Y \text{ has it, i.e. } (\exists F) X \text{ loves } [\text{that } Y \text{ has } F] \) (wide scope)
According to this analysis, the content of the proposition in the analysans is given partly in terms of the existential quantifier and so does not suffer from the same shortcoming as the previous analysis. All that is required for the analysis is that *something* about God be loved, not that some particular property of God be loved. Given that reference to a particular property is avoided, the analysis does not obviously fail to state a necessary condition.

The fact that this analysis is obviously implausible, and no improvement over the previous one, is part of the point. I am trying to do the best that I can for the propositionalist and failing to come up with anything satisfactory. My challenge to the propositionalist is to do better, and this style of analysis seems the most promising so far. Indeed, it preserves something that is apparently inseparable from the propositionalist project: the idea that loving, worshiping or adoring is loving, worshiping or adoring something about the object in question. It seems, however, that there are decisive reasons for rejecting both the wide scope reading and the narrow scope reading.

Since the narrow scope reading seems obviously implausible—the embedded proposition states a necessary truth, that everything has a property, and so surely cannot provide an adequate analysis—I’ll move directly to the wide scope analysis

\[b\] there is some property such that \( X \) loves that \( Y \) has it, i.e. \((\exists F) \ X \) loves [that \( Y \) has \( F \)]

or more informally

\[b\] \( X \) loves \( Y \) if and only if there is some property \( F \) such that \( X \) loves that \( Y \) has \( F \).

Does it do any better? Note first that while narrow \[a\] has the general form given by \[I\] above, wide \[b\] has the form

\[II\] \( X \) \( \phi \)s \( Y \) if and only if \((\exists F) \ X \) \( \psi \)s that \( Y \) has \( F \), where ‘\( \phi \)’ and ‘\( \psi \)’ stand for intentional attitudes, \( \phi = \psi \), and ‘\( F \)’ is replaced by some predicate.

To see why this analysis is implausible, we can begin with a simple truth about analyses: the analysans and the analysandum of any successful analysis mutually entail one another. Combining this point with the wide scope propositionalist analysis of objectual attitudes, however, results in a straightforward counterexample. Consider (6) *Solomon loves that John (his hated enemy) is suffering*. By existential generalization on properties we can infer (7) \((\exists F) \ [Solomon loves that John has F]\): it follows from Solomon’s loving that John is suffering that there is some property such that Solomon loves that John has it. Now the wide scope propositionalist analysis of ‘loves’ has the following general form: (8) \( X \) loves \( Y \) if and only if \((\exists F) \ X \) loves that \( Y \)
has $F$, and (9) Solomon loves John if and only if $(\exists F)[\text{Solomon loves that John has } F]$ is just an instance of (8). But from (7) and (9) we may infer (10) Solomon loves John. Plainly this line of argument will apply to wide scope propositionalist analyses of many other objectual attitudes, and since the only part of the derivation that we can reasonably fault is precisely the wide scope propositionalist analysis of ‘loves,’ we must abandon it.

It may now be said that only a certain restricted set of predicates can go into the predicate position in a propositionalist analysis of ‘loves’ and that ‘is suffering’ is not one of them. But this point is not much help to the propositionalist, for similar counterexamples can be constructed using properties like the property of beauty. Solomon may love that Rosamond is beautiful. By existentially generalizing on the property of beauty the wide scope analysis of ‘loves’ is entailed: $(\exists F)[\text{Solomon loves that Rosamond has } F]$. But Solomon may not love Rosamond; although her beauty enchants him, he is in love with someone else. I believe this strategy will work for all properties.

The propositionalist may point out that despite the failure of the properties of beauty and suffering to capture the essence of love, it is none the less necessary that in order to love someone one must love something about that person; so that the proposed analysis of ‘loves’ does at least capture a necessary condition. But we may grant this point, for purposes of argument. It doesn’t save the propositionalist, because propositionalism is the position that all intentional attitudes, including objectual attitudes, are relations to propositions, and what the above counterexamples suggest is that the project of providing a sufficient condition for ‘loves’ (and other objectual attitudes) is hopeless. Whatever property Solomon loves about Rosamond, her beauty, kindness, humor, intelligence, or some combination of these, it does not follow that Solomon loves Rosamond.

At this point, propositionalists may question the assumption, shared by [I] and [II], that the intentional attitude cited in the analysans must be the same as the attitude being analyzed. In place of [II] they may propose

\[ \text{[III]} \quad \phi \psi \text{ if and only if } (\exists F) \ X \psi \text{ that } Y \text{ has } F, \text{ where } \phi \text{ and } \psi \text{ stand for intentional attitudes and } F \text{ is a place-holder for a set of predicates.} \]

[III] differs from [II] simply in removing ‘$\phi = \psi$’ and so allowing that when we put ‘love’ or ‘contemplate’ (for example) for ‘$\phi$’, we need not also put it for ‘$\psi$’.

To assess this proposal we need a concrete account of what can be put for ‘$\psi$’. Obviously it can’t be a set of intentional attitudes that includes some new ones in addition to the objectual attitude to be analyzed—so that X loves Y, for example, is analyzed as X loves (something about) Y, X believes (something about) Y, X desires (something about) Y and so on—for that will leave us no further on. One suggestion may then be that there is a fundamental set of propositional attitudes suitable for the analysis of all objectual attitudes,
specifically in so far as they are intentional attitudes. Searle, for example, proposes that the intentionality of all apparently objectual attitudes may be reduced to the intentionality of ‘Bel’ and ‘Des’, and that insofar as ‘loves’ denotes anything over and above belief and desire it is just a feeling (a certain ‘flavor’ of desire, as it were) that is not in itself intentional in any way. But even if we grant that ‘desire’ always denotes an essentially propositional attitude, and never an objectual attitude, it seems most implausible that all candidates for being irreducibly objectual intentional attitudes (I have X in mind, I contemplate, imagine, worship, remember, recognize X) will admit of such a reduction to intrinsically non-intentional flavors—even if attitudes other than belief and desire are included.

Attitudes such as ‘contemplate’, ‘imagine’ and ‘have in mind’ prove particularly problematic. Searle's account of ‘loves’ and other affective states is that they are forms of desire dependent on certain beliefs. But how do we apply this account to ‘contemplates’, ‘imagines’, ‘have in mind’? These are not forms of desire at all. Searle himself expresses reservations:

> with some states one cannot get very far with this sort of analysis. For example, if I am amused that the Democrats have lost this election, I must Bel that they have lost the election, but what else? I need have no Des's one way or the other.”

Given such problematic cases, it seems that we should accept Searle’s conservative conclusion that a propositionalist analysis of intentional attitudes is “a special theory” that deals only with certain cases, and to that extent leaves unchallenged the view that some intentional attitudes are (irreducibly) objectual.

Note, finally, that many are also committed to the view that all perceptual intentionality is propositional in form. Searle, for example, writes that

> The content of the visual experience, like the content of the belief, is always equivalent to a whole proposition. Visual experience is never simply of an object but rather it must always be that such and such is the case . . . . [This] is an immediate (and trivial) consequence of the fact that [visual experiences] have conditions of satisfaction, for conditions of satisfaction are always that such and such is the case.

But such an appeal to conditions of satisfaction seems to beg the question. For why shouldn’t one say that the condition of satisfaction of a visual experience of an object X (i.e. what makes it the case that a visual experience is indeed a visual experience of X) is just that one did in fact see X, and that its conditions of satisfaction consist simply of the object X plus a certain sort of causal-connection condition? Propositionalists are committed to the view that no mental state or event of any creature ever really managed to be genuinely intentional, genuinely about anything, as life evolved on earth,
until creatures started having attitudes to propositions (this seems unfair to dinosaurs, or overgenerous); they are committed to the view that any currently living creature that manages to be in a state that is about anything in its environment has an attitude to a proposition. It may be replied that all intentional states of simpler animals are indeed essentially propositional in that they are essentially state-of-affairs-ish, not just focused on particular objects. But if this is allowed, it strongly suggests that one fundamental way in which our own thought is unlike the thought of other animals is precisely in its capacity for a certain sort of simplicity: one of the things that is special about complex thought like our own, with its special powers of abstraction, is that it enables us to be in intentional states that are merely or purely objectual in a way that lower animals cannot be.31

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I have argued that not all intentional attitudes are propositional attitudes. Some are objectual attitudes, attitudes that relate thinkers to non-propositional objects. In the absence of any concrete general propositionalist proposals about how to analyze objectual attitudes, I have accepted the standard logico-linguistic terms of debate and offered some myself. I have argued that they all fail, and that the burden is squarely on the propositionalists to put forward a detailed general defense of their view, which we have otherwise no reason to accept. I have also offered in section 5 a refutation of propositionalism in completely different terms, by reference to the notion of liking or pro-attitude.

If propositionalism fails, what should we say about the motivations for propositionalism? Some of the most pressing have to do with the interface between logic and the attitudes. I mentioned two: mental causation and human reasoning. Lewis held that entailments between the objects of the attitudes are easier to capture if they form a uniform class, and that a satisfying theory of causal transitions between intentional mental states motivates the same requirement. It seems, however, that this uniform class cannot contain only propositions, and that what is needed to account for our reasoning practices is a logic that can capture entailments involving both propositional and non-propositional objects.32,33

Notes

1In this paper I will use ‘attitude’ in a familiar way to cover both dispositional mental states and occurrent mental events or processes.

2I’m following Forbes’ (2000b) usage of the term ‘objectual attitudes’.


41992, p. 23.

Lemos (1994) p. 29.

Strictly speaking, in propositional and predicate logic connectives do not have propositions as arguments and values; they are functions from truth values to truth values. But since propositions or something proposition-like are the bearers of truth or falsity, it is clear that propositions are being invoked in characterizing inferences.


See e.g. Searle (1983), Green (1992).
Searle (1983) p. 5. He also favors the extension of propositionalism to case of perceptual experience; see p. 514 below.

So, for example, Mary loves Nancy would be analyzed as Mary loves that Nancy is $F$, Mary believes that Nancy is $F$, Mary desires that Nancy is $F$ and so on. In this context, this analysis of ‘loves’ seems harmlessly circular.

These examples are commonly cited as troublesome for the propositionalist. See e.g. Church (1967), Forbes (2000a and 2000b), Montague (1974), and Zalta (1988).

See also McCawley (1974). Although den Dikken et al. are concerned with the semantics of intensional verbs, the syntactical evidence they produce, if convincing, provides a reason to treat objectual attitudes as propositional attitudes.

den Dikken et al. also offer an analysis of ‘seeks’, which I will consider briefly in section 6. Larson (2002) also offers propositions for depiction verbs such as ‘visualizes’ and ‘expects’: ‘For verbs of depiction, the transitive form typically corresponds to a ‘small clause’ construction, containing an overt subject and a bare predicate. Thus V-NP corresponds to V [NP XP], where XP is some kind of bare predicate, such as a PP (in front of him), or an AP (present), etc.’ (p. 234). Thus ‘Max visualized [a unicorn]’ becomes ‘Max visualized [a unicorn in front of him]’. This proposal is not general enough to cover all cases, however, and it is difficult to see how to extend its application. For instance, it is not the case that visualizing a unicorn requires that one visualize that one stands in a spatial relation to it, or indeed that it stand in a spatial relation to anything.

I owe this example to an anonymous referee.

At first, a’s $F$-ness may also seem to be an example of a propositional structure, as in Mary loves Nancy’s $F$-ness. However, the best way to understand this sort of case points to trope theory rather than to propositionalism. Tropes are particularized instances of properties, i.e. Socrates’ whiteness and Plato’s whiteness are distinct tropes. If one is focused on a’s $F$-ness as opposed to anyone else’s $F$-ness, they seem to be focused on a trope.

Philosophers and linguists generally distinguish between finite and infinite clauses on the basis of tense: while finite clauses are tensed and begin with ‘that’, infinite clauses are not tensed. Whether this results in a semantical difference is controversial. The examples considered in this paper support the claim that one can capture infinite clauses with semantically equivalent ‘that’-clauses. This issue, however, does not have direct bearing on the issue of propositionalism, for both finite and infinite clauses are propositional.

I will stick to ‘that’-clause constructions for the purposes of this section, but the same arguments apply to any form of sentential complement.
This general form can be adjusted to accommodate different propositional structures. The general form for ‘wants’, for example, may be the following: \( X \phi s Y \) if and only if \( X \phi s [\text{PRO-to have-} Y] \); for ‘seeks’, \( X \phi s Y \) if and only if \( X \phi s [\text{PRO-to find-} Y] \).

This is position [A] in section 2.

This is position [C] in section 2.

This is position [B] in section 2.

This, one might say, is the \( Ur \) intentional attitude.


This, perhaps, is the basis of our capacity to make truly new connections, leaps, in thought, the ground of our creativity. Our capacity for objectual attitudes might then be explanatory of some of the most striking features of our thought.

An intensional logic based on objects called ‘constructions’ developed by Pavel Tichy (1988) can capture entailments involving propositional and non-propositional objects. If it can be shown that constructions are also involved in intentional attitudes, the theory of constructions would satisfy important motivations for propositionalism without committing to propositionalism.

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References


