Critical Notice: Scott Soames, *What is Meaning?*

Introduction

Scott Soames' *What is Meaning?* (Princeton University Press, 2010: pp. 132 + x; £20.95/$29.95) is an excellent book on an important foundational topic in the philosophy of language. The central question with which the book is concerned is, of course, that of the title. More specifically, Soames largely "take[s] it for granted" (1) that linguistic expressions have meanings, and that in the case of sentences those meanings are propositions.[1] The issue is what propositions are. Although I am sympathetic to Soames' basic position, which departs from the orthodoxy in allowing a role for psychology in constituting propositions, I will argue that he ought to have been more radical. Nevertheless, the position which Soames articulates marks an important departure from the standard view – and one which, to my mind, constitutes an improvement.

The Basic Position

Propositions, according to Soames, are expressed by sentences, and yet are distinct from the linguistic items which express them; they are also the objects of the propositional attitudes (i.e. things believed, known, and asserted), and the bearers of (necessary and contingent) truth and falsity (2-3). So far this is little more than definitional for Soames.[2] But theories of the nature of propositions must also explain (i) what it is to bear an attitude to them; and (ii) why they are representational, and accordingly bear truth conditions (6). On "traditional" accounts, advocated by e.g. Frege and the early Russell, propositions are "denizens of a "third realm" (beyond mind and matter), which are "grasped" by a mysterious intellectual faculty of platonic extrasensory perception" (7); moreover, they are "intrinsically representational, and that from which all other representational bearers of truth conditions –sentences, utterances, and mental states - inherit their representationality" (7). But Soames argues that such platonic propositions don't exist; instead he advocates a "cognitive realist" theory of propositions which reverses the traditional order of explanation.

According to the cognitive realist theory, propositions are cognitive event types. There is, of course, much more detail in Soames' theory, and more will be said in due course about what types of cognitive events propositions are for Soames; but it is worth first noting how plausible this basic position is. As Soames himself argues, the view provides a simple explanation of what it is to entertain a proposition: it is simply to be the agent of a cognitive event (token) of the relevant type. No mysterious faculty of extrasensory perception here! Moreover, the theory accounts nicely for the fact that propositions are representational, and have truth-conditions: on this view "propositions are representational *because* of the relations they bear to inherently representational mental states and cognitive acts of agents" (7).

---

[1] Soames deals largely with context-insensitive languages; but to accommodate context sensitivity Soames might say that the meaning of a sentence, *relative to a context*, is a proposition.

[2] One might, of course, dispute the claim, for any of the conditions mentioned, that there are things meeting it, or – perhaps more interestingly (see Lewis (1980), Ninan (2010)) – that the same things meet all of the conditions in question. I will not press these concerns here.

To begin to get a richer feel for the view (or at least one precisification of it[3]) we may think of it as follows. Many words of philosophical interest exhibit an act/object ambiguity; and the central terms at the foundations of semantics and the philosophy of language -"assertion", "thought", "proposition" - are no exception. Yet while the objects of some acts are distinct from the acts themselves, those of others are not. Consider, for instance, the ontology of art. Confronted with the difficulty of giving necessary and sufficient conditions for objects to be works of art in terms of the intrinsic features of those objects, some philosophers - e.g. Currie (1989) and Davies (2004) - have been led to the view that artworks are action types. This has the decided advantage of locating artistry in the creative activity rather than its material product (when there is one); that is, art is not characterized by the making of a certain sort of object – rather, objects are artworks because of the nature of the activity which produces them. However, while it is plausible in some cases – say, jazz improvisations, or ballet performances – to identify an artwork with the action type which produces it, in other cases this is plainly mistaken: paintings and sculptures, for example, are clearly objects distinct from, but produced by, certain characteristic activities. Soames' proposal regarding the propositional attitudes is that they are like performances, not paintings: their objects are not distinct from the acts themselves. In particular, what one thinks, when one thinks, is simply a certain type of thought.[4]

Of course, Soames might not put the point this way himself; for he carefully distinguishes his view that propositions are cognitive event types from the view that they are what he calls "act types" (100).[5] There is a terminological issue here and a substantive issue. The substantive issue is whether propositions are property-like or situation-like: that is, whether they include their agents as constituent parts. Soames argues that they do, and that propositions are situation-like. The terminological issue is which of these – the situation-like entities which include their agents or the property-like entities which don't - to call "act types". Soames opts for the latter. Thus, he claims that propositions are not act types but (cognitive) event types.

Less schematically, Soames argues that it is incorrect to say, for instance, that the proposition that *P* is what I just did or what I plan to do; yet if act types are the sorts of things one can perform, or plan to perform, and propositions are act types, this ought to be acceptable. Similarly, Soames thinks it is unacceptable to say that what I just did is true or false; yet it ought to be acceptable if propositions are act types. Soames' diagnosis is that act types, as he is thinking of them, are "closely akin to properties" (102) - this why they can be done, or had, by agents – but propositions aren't.

The points Soames makes here are apt; he is right on the substantive issue. But it is not clear that ordinary usage favours his terminological decision. Consider manslaughter. Surely this is a type of act; crudely, it is the type of act in which an agent unintentionally kills someone. Yet it is not a type of act one can plan to perform: for then the killing would not be unintentional! As Soames is construing the performance of a type of action one must, in effect, follow the rule which defines the type; but another perfectly acceptable way of speaking allows that one can perform an action of a

---

[3] See below for an alternative view that is also compatible with what Soames says.

[4] As we shall see, on this view what one proposes or asserts, when proposing or asserting, is also a type of thought – though, in some cases at least, a fairly special type for which we might reserve the word "proposition".

[5] A second and more substantive reason is discussed below: Soames may regard the attitudes as relational states.

given type simply by conforming to the characteristic rule. Action types in this second sense are the situation-like event types Soames has in mind; and it is in this sense that pieces of performance art, and indeed thoughts and propositions on Soames' view, are action types.[6]

Let us turn, however, to the detailed contents of the book, which is in seven chapters.

Setting the Stage: Failed Theories

The first chapter articulates the problem to be confronted and introduces Soames' preferred solution (sketched above). The second chapter argues that there are no platonic propositions as conceived and defended by Frege and the Russell of *Principles of Mathematics*. There is some interesting historical discussion here, particularly of Frege's reasons for thinking that the senses of predicates are unsaturated; but the principal objective is to discern the "real problem" of the unity of the proposition. This is not the "pseudo-problem" (106) of explaining what holds the constituents of a proposition together, but rather that of answering the question, "*What makes propositions representational, and hence capable of interpreting sentences by providing their meanings?*" (32). Soames claims that it is hard to see how a view which identifies a proposition with "*any formal structure*" (31) – that is, any "system of relations that organizes the constituents of the proposition in terms of relations that are not themselves [semantic]" (31) – could provide an answer to this question; and it is for this reason that he rejects platonic propositions.

Chapter 3 rehearses Soames' reasons for thinking that propositions (a) are required in semantics, contra proponents of Davidsonian truth-theoretic semantics, and (b) can't be unstructured sets of "truth-supporting circumstances" as advocates of intensional/situation semantics maintain. There is not much new here for those who are familiar with Soames' views on these issues, and those who aren't will want to read the original articles[7] to get a feel for the full force of the considerations Soames levies; but the overview is careful and clear and will no doubt prove useful as a result.

The fourth chapter begins with the hypothesis that propositions are structured entities that act as the semantic values of complement clauses in attitude ascriptions. Soames then proceeds to articulate a "two-stage" (50) semantic theory which first associates sentences with certain structured entities, and then second formulates a theory of truth, relative to a circumstance, for those entities. This two-stage proposal is effectively one that he has advocated in the past (Soames 1987); but now Soames recognizes "an embarrassment" (53).[8] When it comes to giving the meanings of attitude ascriptions, the theory identifies one of the structured entities to serve as the object of the attitude expressed by the attitude verb; but it does not allow one to "read off" (54) how the

---

[6] Construed this way, actions are a subclass of events; plausibly, the events in question are distinguished by having agents. Moreover, events are just a subclass of situations – the other main subclass being states. Thus, on Soames' cognitive realist theory, propositions end up being not just situation-like, but indeed types of situation (with cognitive agents central to them). In light of this, it is a bit surprising to see Soames so critical (62-63) of Russell's view that the truth-bearers are facts: for Russell uses the term "fact", albeit wrongly, to speak of situation-like entities in which objects instantiate universals. Thus, there appears to be just a single substantive difference between Russell's ontology of truth-bearers and Soames': Russell, it seems, takes them to be situation tokens, while Soames takes them to be situation types. And even then, Soames acknowledges (as we have seen) that the types are representational, and hence truth-conditional, because of the inherent representationality of the tokens; so presumably the same should be said of their truth-bearing capacities.

[7] See Soames (1987) and (1992). These articles are now usefully collected in Soames (2009).

[8] Jeffrey King (2006, 2007) has done much to stress the difficulties confronting views of this kind; it is surprising to see no acknowledgement of this fact at this, or indeed any other, stage of Soames' book.

ascription sentence represents the world to be, because it doesn't identify the proposition to which the attitude is said to be borne in a way that reveals that proposition's truth-conditions.

Soames claims that this is "an instance of the problem Donald Davidson had in mind" (54) when he complained that meanings are of "no demonstrated use" in semantic theory.[9] This is no doubt true; though one can't help but think that there is more to the Davidsonian complaint than this. In particular, associating a particular event token of uttering a sentence with the proposition which is its object, on this view, is in no way explanatory of the particular characteristic manner of meaning of (such uses of) that sentence. The reason is that to effectuate such a pairing is to do nothing more than categorize the event as belonging to a certain type – and taxonomy is merely a precursor to explanation. Indeed, Soames' plan of reversing the traditional order of explanation of representationality depends on this point; and it is especially clear if, as Soames believes, there are "many propositions to which our only cognitive access is mediated by sentences of our language that express them" (8) so that the use of language "expand[s] our cognitive reach" (8). Yet it is hard to see how it can be accommodated in full if it is denied, as it is by Soames,[10] that a semantic theory is a theory of semantic competence.

In any case, it is not surprising that the two-stage semantics fails; for it identifies propositions with certain purely formal structures in the sense quoted above. What are needed instead, according to Soames, are properly semantic structures.

The Seeds of a Viable Alternative

In the second half of chapter 4 Soames uncovers a "neglected insight" (55) in Russell's account of truth in *The Problems of Philosophy*. According to the multiple-relation theory of judgement articulated there, there are no propositions; rather, propositional constituents are unified by the cognitive act of believing or judging, and it is the beliefs or judgements themselves which are true or false. Soames gives detailed, and by and large convincing, criticisms of this view;[11] most notably, Soames complains that "what any agent adds [for example] to Desdemona, loving, and Cassio to bring it about that a *belief* that Desdemona loves Cassio represents the world in a certain way is *the same* as what an agent adds to those constituents to bring it about that an *assertion, hypothesis,* or *conjecture* that Desdemona loves Cassio represents things in the same way" (64-65). Thus, Soames arrives at the view that "[w]hat unites the elements of a proposition, and gives it representational import, is something that agents do when they bear cognitive relations to it – namely, *predicate* one propositional constituent of the others" (65). He holds that "predication is… a primitive notion" (81), but one that admits of elucidation: for instance, we predicate a property F of an object o when we perceive o as F, when we believe o to be F, or when we understand a linguistic utterance to the effect that o is F. Although he later expands the repertoire, Soames initially proposes that predication is the only cognitive act which plays a role in making propositions representational, and he suggests that "to entertain a proposition… is… to predicate something of something else" (81). In this way, Soames is able to provide a full but simple answer to the two questions facing a theory of propositions articulated above.

---

[9] See Davidson (1967), reprinted in his (2001).
[10] See Soames (1989), reprinted in his (2009).
[11] Though see note 6 for one area of concern about them.

In chapter 5 Soames gives a kind of minimal theory of propositions answering to the above description. He calls this theory "deflationary" (69): the motivating idea is that "propositions are theoretical constructs used to track the predications that make up the cognitive lives of agents" (94). His final sophisticated cognitive realist theory of propositions differs from this deflationary theory in two principal respects. First, on the realist theory, cognitive acts play a role in constituting propositions, whereas on the deflationary theory they merely play a role in the entertaining of them. This switch to the (simple) realist theory is introduced in chapter 6. Second, the repertoire of cognitive acts which plays this role is refined and expanded. This modification, which yields the sophisticated realist theory, occurs in chapter 7. I will discuss the deflationary and simple realist views in the remainder of this section, and then, after a brief detour, return to consider the sophisticated realist theory in the section after next.

On the deflationary approach "propositions are structured complexes that are constructed out of, or at least encode, the semantic contents of the constituents of the sentences that express them" (69); but they are immediately interpretable, unlike those posited by the earlier two-stage semantic theory, because they include "information about what is predicated of what" (79), principally, it seems, by containing "mnemonic labels" (79) at their nodes. These propositions are not *intrinsically* truth-conditional (90) - one can isolate a particular one of them in thought, for instance, without performing the predications necessary to interpret it representationally (91); rather, they are only representational because the theory stipulates that to entertain one is to perform the relevant predications (82) - that is, by virtue of being possibly entertained (90). This does not prevent deflationary propositions from being *essentially* representational, however, because "the necessary and sufficient conditions for entertaining [them] don't change from one world-state to another" (90); indeed, they can be true at a world even if they are not entertained at that world (90).

Nevertheless, the fact that deflationary propositions aren't intrinsically truth-conditional does cause problems for this minimal theory. Since "many different formal structures are good candidates" (70) for being a given proposition, the theory is subject to a Benacerraf-style worry[12] to the effect that it is indeterminate which such structure in fact *is* that proposition. Soames is not terribly concerned by this consideration *per se* (71); but he thinks it may cause problems for the deflationary theory when it comes to complex propositions (96). For instance, propositions of the form *it is not the case that P* are taken to be abstract structures in which *not being true* is predicated of the proposition that *P*. But it is a little awkward to see how an agent could predicate something of *P* without (in some sense) knowing which thing *P* is. While Soames is not certain that this concern constitutes a decisive objection to the deflationary theory, he takes it to motivate the search for an alternative (97).

The cognitive realist theory offers a neat explanation of how it is that we are in a position to make predications of propositions, and thereby entertain complex propositions: "agents capable of being acquainted with their own cognitive processes – in the sense of being able to make them objects of their thought – will typically be capable of being acquainted with [a given proposition], by virtue of being acquainted with the cognitive event that is the instance of it they have brought about" (105); they can accordingly determinately predicate e.g. *not being true* of such a type, say *P*, and thereby think that *not P*. The reason this simple explanation is available is that, for the (simple) cognitive realist, propositions just *are* event types of predicating; accordingly, propositions are intrinsically

[12] See Benacerraf (1965).

representational, and there is no arbitrariness in which thing a given proposition is to be identified with. This is really the core difference between the realist and deflationary theories.

Are Attitudes Intrinsic or Relational States of Agents?

On the cognitive realist theory propositions are essentially truth-conditional, just as they are on the deflationary theory: indeed, the same argument, rehearsed above, establishes this fact in each case. Soames even argues that propositions realistically construed could be true at worlds at which they did not exist if it should turn out that there are such worlds - which there might be, if types can exist only at worlds where they have tokens. Soames does not, however, commit on the question of whether there are such worlds. This leaves his cognitive realist theory indeterminate in a certain respect. In particular, I suggested earlier that we might regard Soames' view as one on which the objects of cognitive acts are not distinct from the acts themselves; that is, in effect, that such acts are not relational, but are rather intrinsic conditions of their agents.[13] But if cognitive act types (e.g. propositions) can exist at worlds where they are not tokened, then this characterization might seem a little misleading; for the type then appears to be an entity that is wholly distinct from its instances. In this case, it would seem that a token act of that type involves a relation to something ontologically independent of it.

Soames may prefer this relational conception of the attitudes to the alternative on which they are intrinsic features of their agents; certainly he advocates a relational semantics for attitude ascriptions. Yet it seems to me that the approach which treats the objects of the attitudes as intrinsic to them is preferable. To begin with, the relational metaphysics is not forced on one by the relational semantics. Take any attitude ascription of the form "S believes that P". Clearly, the proposition that *P* will exist *at the subject S's world* if the ascription is true at that world (whether the ascription is entertained at that world or not); and it will exist at the ascriber's world whether the ascription is true or false. Thus, the ascription can be semantically relational while the attitude is non-relational in character. Moreover, given the plausible account of how a proposition can be true relative to a world at which it doesn't exist which Soames provides, denying that propositions exist at worlds at which they are not tokened will allow the theorist to avoid commitment to the soundness of Timothy Williamson's (2002) argument that everything exists necessarily;[14] and I take it this is a virtue. Finally, and most importantly, Soames' claim to have reversed the order of explanation of representationality on the traditional platonist is most plausible if the proposition itself is not ontologically independent of its instances; for then it is clear that it has no features which are intrinsic to it except those which it inherits from its tokens. So it seems we should accept the non-relational version of the cognitive realist theory on which propositions do not exist at worlds at which they are not entertained.[15]

---

[13] This suggestion is not incompatible with content externalism; for nothing that was said here precludes that agents themselves are externally individuated.

[14] The argument runs approximately as follows. If the proposition that a given object does not exist is to be true at a world w, it had better exist at w, and hence so had the object. (This last inference is clearest if the object is taken to be a constituent of the proposition.) But the world and the object in this argument were arbitrary; so everything exists necessarily.

[15] Soames does object to Russell that there are many truths which no one entertains, while Russell's theory in *The Problems of Philosophy* cannot account for this fact since, in effect, he regards the truth-bearers as situation tokens, not types. The problem might be overcome by allowing that types can exist at worlds where

The Final View

In the final chapter of the book, Soames considers modifications to the cognitive realist theory. The deflationary theory of propositions, from which the simple realist theory is adapted, is constructed in connection with a language PL which contains truth-functional connectives, lambda-abstraction, unrestricted quantifiers, modal operators, and attitude verbs. Although this language is expressively powerful, there are things which can be said in natural languages which cannot be said in it; and so the realist theory of propositions must be modified if it is to prove satisfactory. Soames suggests that some extensions to the language such as "adding indexicals… are essentially trivial" (109), but that "[t]he challenging extensions involve propositions expressed by sentences containing syntactically and semantically complex expressions of various types not found in PL" (110). He focuses on three types of complex expressions, and as a result of his considerations makes two changes to the simple theory: the account of predication is refined; and the list of cognitive acts taken to be constitutive of propositions is expanded. I look at each of these modifications in turn.

Predication

The first group of complex expressions the semantics of which Soames tackles is that of complex singular terms. Soames claims, quite plausibly, that entertaining the proposition that *six cubed is greater than fourteen squared* is different from entertaining the proposition that *216 is greater than 196* - and that neither act is involved in the other – even though six cubed is 216 and fourteen squared is 196. Since entertaining the second of these propositions is a matter of predicating *being greater than* of 216 and 196 (in that order), and entertaining the first of them is matter of predicating the same relation of *the result of applying the cube function to six* and *the result of applying the square function to fourteen* (in that order), Soames concludes, first, that *applying a function to an argument* is another cognitive act, besides *predicating*, which plays a role in "constituting propositions" (115), and second, that "predicates" creates a linguistic context which is not extensional, and in this respect "is analogous to *intensional transitive verbs* like 'worship' and 'look for'" (117).

These claims are eminently plausible; yet some will wonder why Soames has been unwilling to go further. In particular, Soames claims that an expression α is not exportable from the context "S predicates P of… α…"; that is, that from the truth of a claim of this form it does not follow that there is an object identical with α such that S predicates P of it. It is also clear from the above discussion that Soames thinks substitution of (even necessarily) co-extensional terms - e.g. "216" for "six cubed" - in such contexts fails to preserve truth-value. Soames does not tell us how exactly to delimit the class of terms for which these two inference patterns fail; however, given his views on the related matter of substitution within attitude ascription contexts,[16] as well as his choice of examples here (117), it seems we should assume that he thinks the failures occur only when at least one of the singular terms in question is complex.[17] Yet one might think that inferences of these kinds can fail when the singular terms involved are simple names. For instance, one might accept that "Agamemnon believed that sacrificing Iphigenia would appease Artemis" and "Agamemnon asserted

---

it has no tokens; but an alternative is to say that what is meant by our target claim is that there could be propositions which are in fact true and which no one has in fact entertained.

[16] See Soames (1987), reprinted in his (2009).

[17] Indeed, though Soames does not discuss this point, one might expect failures of substitution of necessarily co-extensive expressions in the position occupied by "P", as well as that occupied by "α" in the above predication schema. See the discussion of what is predicated below for some relevant discussion.

that sacrificing Iphigenia would appease Artemis" are true while denying that there is such a thing as Artemis, and rejecting the results of substituting "Diana" for "Artemis" in these sentences as false. If so, one might also expect that it is possible to predicate *appeasement* of Artemis.

Soames says that "the verb 'predicate' expresses a cognitive relation between an agent, a property, and a content" (117). The "content" mentioned here can be either an individual, if the singular term which follows "predicate" is simple, or a means of picking out an individual - an individual concept (type) - if that term is complex. But what of that which is predicated? It is clear on reflection that while Soames thinks this is sometimes a property, as he says here, on other occasions it is a propositional function;[18] and if propositions are in part psychologically constituted, as they are on Soames' view, it seems the same must be true of propositional functions.[19] All of this suggests that Soames takes the cognitive act of predication to be one that sometimes involves (wholly) worldly entities, and sometimes involves (at least partially) psychological entities, with respect both to what is predicated and that of which it is predicated.

This view can be contrasted with an alternative metaphysics of predication. On this alternative view predication consists of – that is, can be analysed[20] as - the application of a general concept (token) to an individual concept (token); or, in Kantian terms, the subsumption of an intuition under a concept.[21] All of the items involved here are psychological entities – though, of course, the predication is correct only if there is an object to which both the individual and general concepts apply. This account of predication has the advantage of being unified rather than disjunctive; moreover, it allows for the cases in which some of the simple individual concepts involved are either empty, or distinct despite being (even necessarily) co-extensive.

One might – and Soames probably would – find the suggestion that there can be empty singular thoughts employing simple concepts, or distinct such thoughts in which the same predication is made of the same object, problematic. It will therefore be worth dwelling on how this is possible; my account follows that of Kent Bach (1987).

Each token event in which an agent thinks of an object (that is, each *singular* thought) involves some psychological mode of presentation of the object in question – an individual concept (token). We can distinguish amongst such thought tokens those whose object, if any, is determined by the (semantic) relation of *satisfaction* from those whose object, if any, is determined by a *contextual* (natural, or causal) relation; the former are *descriptive*, the latter *de re*. And we may say that the individual concepts employed in *de re* thoughts are *simple*, while those involved in descriptive thoughts are *complex*.

---

[18] At other times – for instance, when he speaks of "complex properties" – it seems Soames thinks of himself as being concerned with properties when in fact he is concerned with (something like) propositional functions.
[19] What precisely propositional functions are will be explained below; the claim made here can be corroborated in light of that account.
[20] Note that the analysis in question is metaphysical, not semantic or conceptual. The claim that predication has an analysis in this sense is perhaps compatible with Soames' claim (quoted above) that the *notion* of predication is primitive; though I suspect Soames intends his claim to rule out the sort of analysis I am suggesting.
[21] The word "intuition" here is used to mean *individual representation*, and "concept" to mean *general representation*. The fact that Kant thought – falsely - that all intuition was either sensible or pure is irrelevant for present purposes.

Tokens, of course, belong to many types; and thought tokens are no exception in this respect. Clearly, we can group together token *de re* thoughts according to whether they involve making the same predication of the same object. This is, in effect, what Soames does; the result is that there can be no empty *de re* thought types, nor distinct *de re* thought types in which the same predication is made of the same object. But we need not group thought tokens together in this way; instead we can group them according to whether or not they involve presenting their objects, if any, in the same way.

Interestingly, it seems that the latter typing may prove more advantageous in psychology than the former. Distinct agents thinking thoughts about themselves under that mode of presentation naturally expressed with the word "I", for instance, are likely to behave similarly (other things being equal), though their thoughts have different objects; yet agents having thoughts with the same object are likely to behave differently (other things being equal) if that object is presented to them in different ways. Moreover, an agent's behaviour may change when the same object-dependent proposition is presented to him under a new mode of presentation (Perry 1979).

Yet this is not to say that the typing Soames focuses on is of no interest; indeed, it seems that object-dependent thought types are of particular importance when it comes to the use of language. For instance, we often make assertions in which we aim to communicate to an audience that some object has some feature, though we don't much care how they think of that object; we consider our communication to have been successful provided that they come to have a thought of the same object-dependent type that we ourselves had. If this is right, then perhaps not every linguistically natural kind of proposition is a psychologically natural kind of thought; though propositions are cognitive event types nevertheless.

Quantification and Other Cognitive Acts

Having addressed the issues raised by complex singular terms, Soames next turns to consider the propositional contributions of complex predicates like "is not red", "is red and round", and "is red or round". He says these predicates express "compound properties… the constituents of which are the simple properties redness and roundness, plus the negation, conjunction, and disjunction [property] operators" (119-120). He then reconsiders complex propositions, such as the negation of a proposition *P*. He notes that on the simple theory, on which this is the result of predicating *not being true* of *P*, entertaining this proposition requires possessing the concept of truth. While he thinks this may not ultimately be a problem, he also suggests that it might motivate further expanding the collection of cognitive acts involved in constituting propositions so as to include that of *negating* a proposition.[22] Similar considerations suggest that we might add *conjoining* and *disjoining* propositions to the list of cognitive acts involved in constituting propositions.

Finally, Soames addresses quantification. Although he adduces considerations in connection with the generalized quantifiers of natural language, such as "few" and "many", I shall ignore these here, as Soames is already puzzled by the standard universal and existential quantifiers. Take a sentence of the form "Everything is F". In dealing with sentences of this kind in PL Soames defended "a variant of the standard and now widely accepted Frege-Russell view" (122); that is, he argued that they express propositions to the effect that *the propositional function g is always true*, where g is the

---

[22] In fact, Soames doubts that this is the right approach to negation; though he certainly thinks it is a possible approach.

propositional function "that assigns to any object o the proposition that predicates F-hood of o" (122). But now Soames wonders what "g is always true" means. If I understand his argument correctly (the dialectic is a little difficult to follow here), there are three possibilities. One might give this phrase the Frege-Russell analysis; that is, one might take "g is always true" to mean *the propositional function* g is always true *is always true*. Doing so, however, leads to regress. In particular, the sentence with which we began – that of the form "Everything is F" – is now said to express the proposition that *g is always true*, which is in turn the proposition that *the propositional function* g is always true *is always true*. Since these have different structures they are different structured propositions. The process can be iterated; but as Soames notes, it is bad enough to claim one proposition to be two, let alone infinitely many. Alternatively – this is the second option - one might treat "is always true" as an unexplained primitive. But this yields a semantics which fails to assign truth-conditions to the propositions expressed by quantified sentences: in particular, our theory won't allow us to derive such principles as "A proposition that predicates *being always true* of a propositional function g is true iff g assigns a true proposition to *every object*" (125). In short, such a theory leaves us with propositions that are not representational. Lastly – this is the third and final option - one might take "g is always true" to mean *g is true of every object* so that principles such as the above fall out immediately. Again, if I understand correctly, Soames thinks this is an acceptable account of the semantics of PL since that is a language which is merely possibly spoken; but it is implausible as an account of natural language quantification. In particular, our understanding of such phrases as "every object" is more basic than that of "is always true" applied to propositional functions; yet the third alternative reverses this order of explanation. Soames suggests that an adequate account of the semantics of quantified sentences might be given "by expanding the range of cognitive acts involved in entertaining various propositions to include quantificational acts of some sort" (129); but, he says frankly, "I don't see precisely how [such an account] should go" (129). He accordingly leaves the correct treatment of natural language quantification as an open problem for the theory of structured propositions.

There is, I think, a solution to Soames' puzzle about the propositions expressed by quantified sentences. Consider the regress articulated above. The problem, it seems, is that the Frege-Russell analysis introduces too many constituents into the structures of quantified propositions;[23] at each iteration, the application of the analysis introduces a new element – the property of being always (or sometimes) true - and we end up with an infinite series of ever more complex propositions. This suggests that what is needed is a syncategorematic treatment of quantifier expressions, on which

[23] One might think this is not so; for there are in fact two views which Soames lumps together as the "Frege-Russell" view. One is that described above, the view that universally quantified sentences express propositions which ascribe *being always true* to propositional functions; but on the other, these sentences ascribe *universal instantiation* to properties. Soames seems to regard these as mere notational variants of one another – principally, it seems to me, because he fails to distinguish propositional functions from properties. Soames allows that some properties are "complex", and hence presumably structured; but if one thinks of properties as (things which are correlated one-one with) functions from possible worlds to extensions, then Soames' regress can't be generated. Soames claims that the proposition that "the property *being F* is true of everything" (123) is not the same as the proposition that "the property *being such that F is true of it* is true of everything" (124); but clearly *being F* and *being such that F is true of it* are necessarily co-extensive properties, so if this is sufficient for property identity, we have the same second-order property being predicated of the same first-order property in each case, and so the same proposition. The cost of this solution, however, is that propositional structure doesn't reflect sentential structure.

they have no meanings of their own (unlike on the Frege-Russell view), but nevertheless make a systematic contribution to the meanings of sentences in which they occur.

The situation can be profitably compared with that of atomic propositions. Some claim that the proposition that, e.g., a certain apple is red just is the proposition that it instantiates redness. But this analysis generates a regress: the proposition suggested by the analysis must in turn be the proposition that the apple in question and redness instantiate instantiation; and so on *ad infinitum*. Soames' account of atomic propositions avoids this difficulty: what unites an object or objects and a universal together to form a proposition, on his view, is not a further propositional constituent; instead it is the mental act of predication.[24] Since no additional element is postulated, iteration does not yield an infinite sequence of ever more structurally complex items. If a similar solution is to be found to the problem at hand, it seems we must allow that there are quantificational cognitive acts. The challenge will be to describe these acts and the items upon which they act in a sufficiently precise manner, and to ensure that the resulting account does not succumb to one or other of the difficulties facing the Frege-Russell view – for it is this, it seems, which Soames finds himself unable to do.

Nevertheless, my proposal is a rather simple-minded one. The proposition expressed by "Everything is F" is, I suggest, the *universal generalization* of a certain type of thought, namely that type of thought in which *being F* is predicated of an object; and this proposition is true just in case that type of thought is true of every object. Notice that here we are not saying that the subject *predicates being true of every object* of the thought type. Rather, the subject simply universally generalizes the thought type; it is the theorist who must use the notion of truth when she wants to explain what universal generalization is.

This account of structured quantified propositions does not lead to regress, for no additional constituent is introduced by this analysis; rather, quantified propositions have just one constituent which is acted upon in a certain way. Moreover, the propositions proposed here have clear truth-conditions, and are accordingly representational. Finally, the theory puts objectual quantification right at the heart of the account of entertaining quantificational propositions, and so does not reverse the order of explanation of this basic semantic phenomenon. In short, the account escapes each of the three horns of Soames' trilemma.

We might say that universal generalization, on the above conception, is an *evaluative*, rather than *interpretive*, act or operation, in the sense that it is sensitive not only to what the meaning it operates on is, but also to how that meaning evaluates. Yet I can't see Soames objecting to it on these grounds; for universal generalization is, in this respect, no different than, say, (propositional) conjunction.[25] Suppose that a subject entertains the proposition that a is F and b is G. How does he do this? Soames' answer is that he entertains the propositions that a is F and that b is G and conjoins them. What is conjunction? Although Soames does not spell this out, surely we must say that it is that act, or operation, which takes two propositions to yield a proposition which is true iff the

---

[24] If one prefers, one might say that the act of predication *is* a constituent, but a structural one. I have no objection to this way of speaking; but it will ease exposition to put the point as I do in the main text.
[25] Nor is it different from predication as I have described it; though on Soames' conception predication appears to be interpretive.

original two are both true.[26] Again, it is the theorist who must employ the concept of truth in giving this elucidation, not the subject; but employ it she must if she is to explain what conjunction is. In short, conjunction, like universal generalization, is evaluative.[27]

The above account of quantified propositions relies crucially on the hypothesis that there are types of thought in which something is predicated of an object, without there being any specific object of which it is predicated; for it is upon these which universal generalization is said to act. As we saw above, I think there are such object-independent types of *de re* thought;[28] but of course some, including Soames, might object to this commitment of the theory. Sometimes the best defence is a good offence, however; and I will accordingly defend this claim by pointing to a difficulty surrounding Soames' alternative – one which he himself ought to acknowledge. The items which play approximately the same role in Soames' account of quantification in PL as is played in my account of quantification by object-independent *de re* thought types are propositional functions. What are these? Presumably they are functions which take objects onto propositions. Assuming the standard mathematical account of functions, this means that they are sets of ordered pairs, such that the first member of each member pair is an object, and the second is a proposition, and such that no two pairs in the set have the same first member and distinct second members.[29] But then there is a certain arbitrariness in these semantic values of the lambda expressions of PL; after all, wouldn't the relation which results from swapping the first and second members of these pairs serve the purposes of the semantic theory equally well? How then could we universally generalize propositional functions, or predicate *being always true* of them? Don't we need to isolate an item in thought first, before we can perform a cognitive act on it? It seems that Soames' propositional functions are no more constituents of propositions than are the deflationary propositions of chapter 5 genuine propositions. Rather, these propositional functions can be at best correlated with, and so serve to represent, genuine propositional constituents. My claim is that those genuine constituents are the object-independent *de re* thought types required by my account of quantified propositions.

It is, I think, worth noting that the cognitive realist theory has the ability to incorporate my proposal regarding quantified propositions in a way that more traditional theories of propositions do not. In particular, since the cognitive realist takes propositions to be cognitive event types, he can concede that there are object-independent *de re* thought types as required – provided he recognizes that thought tokens have *formal* features by which they may be typed. By contrast, if we suppose that propositions are simply structured arrangements of the *contents* of thought, as the traditional theorist does, we will not find room for the items required. To see this, consider what the traditional

---

[26] See Bealer (1979) for an account of conjunction along these lines, and a similarly evaluative treatment of existential generalization. (It is perhaps interesting to note that Bealer's account reduces the conjunction of universals to the conjunction of propositions recursively; and so it can be said that there is just one act here, not two. Similar remarks apply to the other truth-functional operations.)

[27] Indeed, though Soames does not suggest this, one might think that an evaluative account of necessitation is possible. If so, then (given the above account of predication) amongst the operations Soames considers, only those involved in the semantics of attitude verbs fail to be evaluative!

[28] Notice, though, that on the present typing we are not even interested in what kind of simple individual concept is involved, but only that there is some such concept. This will be important below.

[29] This way of thinking of propositional functions makes good sense of Soames' claim that the semantic values of lambda expression don't have, but nevertheless encode, the syntactic structure of the expressions themselves – for each of the propositions which is in the ordered pairs constituting the propositional function either have, or else encode in the same sense, the structure of the open sentence which the lambda operator embeds.

theorist might put in their place. As we have seen, propositional functions will not do, for they are subject to a Benacerraf-style arbitrariness objection. More subtly, the traditional Russellian theorist cannot invoke, say, an equivalence class of propositions – those which result from substituting some object in place of a given constituent – or indeed, those very propositions themselves, to perform the required task. The problem with this last version of the proposal is not that the propositions in question may be infinitely many in number; for we might imagine that quantified propositions are structured as infinitely branching trees. Rather the difficulty for this proposal, on either version, is that it gives the wrong truth-conditions to quantified propositions. In particular, the objects which may be substituted in the relevant location within the propositional structure will be the *actual* objects; and this will have the implausible result that sentences of the form "Necessarily everything is F" will be true if and only if all the propositions in which *being F* is predicated of an actual object are necessary. Nor is the traditional Fregean theorist any better off; for although he recognizes that modes of presentation can figure as contents of thoughts, it is not these which occur in the crucial place within quantified propositions. The thought that everything is F is not the universal generalization of some thought in which an object is presented under some particular mode of presentation – say, as the mother of John Lennon! The thought types upon which we generalize in thinking quantified thoughts are not the results of arranging certain contents into a structure; rather, they are (types of) structured items which have contents. The ability to recognize the relevant propositional constituents, and thereby give an appropriate treatment of quantification, is a genuine advantage of the cognitive realist theory over its traditional rivals.

Conclusion

Frege admonished us not to succumb to psychologism in semantics, and advocated a theory according to which sentences express inherently representational platonic propositions. By recognizing that cognitive acts play a role in constituting propositions, Soames has reintroduced psychology into semantics. In particular, Soames allows that cognitive acts play a role in binding propositional constituents together in a manner that makes the resulting propositions representational. I have been urging that Soames might have gone further; he might have allowed some of the simple constituents themselves to be psychological elements. More picturesquely, Soames' metaphysics of meaning allows only psychological cement in the construction of propositions; yet he might have made room for psychological bricks too. Be that as it may, Soames' excellent book will drive research on this important topic for some time to come.

Works Cited

Bach, Kent (1987), *Thought and reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) ix, 305 p.
Bealer, George (1979), 'Theories of Properties, Relations, and Propositions', *The Journal of Philosophy,* 76 (11), 634-48.
Benacerraf, Paul (1965), 'What Numbers Could Not Be', *Philosophical Review,* 74 (1), 47-73.
Currie, Gregory (1989), *An ontology of art* (Basingstoke: Macmillan in association with the Scots Philosophical Club) xii, 143 p.
Davidson, Donald (1967), 'Truth and Meaning', *Synthese,* 17, 304-23.
--- (2001), *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (2nd edn.; Oxford: Clarendon Press) xxiii + 296.
Davies, David (2004), *Art as performance* (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub.) xii, 278 p.
King, Jeffrey C. 'Structured Propositions', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2006/entries/propositions-structured/>.
--- (2007), *The Nature and Structure of Content* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) x, 230 p.

Lewis, David (1980), 'Index, Context, and Content', in Stig Kanger and Sven Ohman (eds.), *Philosophy and Grammar* (Dordrecht: Reidel), 79-100.

Ninan, Dilip (2010), 'Semantics and the objects of assertion', *Linguistics and Philosophy,* 33 (5), 355-80.

Perry, John (1979), 'The Problem of the Essential Indexical', *Nous,* 13 (1), 3-21.

Soames, Scott (1987), 'Direct Reference, Propositional Attitudes, and Semantic Content', *Philosophical Topics,* 15, 44-87.

--- (1989), 'Semantics and Semantic Competence', *Philosophical Perspectives,* 3, 575-96.

--- (1992), 'Truth, Meaning, and Understanding', *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition,* 65 (1/2), 17-35.

--- (2009), *Philosophical essays*, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press).

--- (2010), *What is meaning?* (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press in association with Soochow University, Taiwan) x, 132 p.

Williamson, Timothy (2002), 'Necessary Existents', in Anthony O'Hear (ed.), *Logic, Thought, and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 233-51.