

## Logical validity, necessary existence, and the nature of propositions

### (A response to Trenton Merrick's *Propositions*)

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In *Propositions*, Trenton Merricks defends a certain vision of the metaphysics of propositions: propositions exist necessarily (even though the objects they are about exist only contingently) and they primitively and essentially represent the world as being a certain way. The book is compact but rich: it is packed with arguments, moves at a fast pace, yet is written with admirable clarity.

While I am sympathetic to many of Merrick's conclusions, I found some of his arguments towards these conclusions lacking. In §1, I discuss his claim that arguments constituted by propositions cannot be logically valid. In §2, I discuss his argument against singular propositions as having the entities they are about as constituents, and in particular his commitment to necessarily existing singular propositions about contingently existing beings. I conclude in §3 with two remarks about Merricks's overall vision: one concerning the fineness of grain and one concerning the question of whether propositions are representational entities.

#### §1. Can arguments constituted by propositions be logically valid?

Let us say that an argument is *modally valid* just in case necessarily, if its premises are true then its conclusion is true, and that an argument is *logically valid* just in case the truth of the premises guarantees the truth of the conclusion and moreover this guarantee is achieved "in virtue of the argument's form".<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 2, Merricks argues that no logically valid argument is modally valid, and no modally valid argument is logically valid. The crux of the argument is the claim that 'logically valid' can only truly apply to arguments constituted by *sentences* while 'modally valid' can only truly apply to arguments constituted by *propositions*.

In this section, I take issue with Merrick's defence of the claim that no modally valid argument is logically valid. For the purpose of this discussion, I grant Merricks that all modally valid arguments are constituted by propositions, and focus on the following question: can an argument constituted by propositions be logically valid? Merricks maintains that it cannot, and he defends this claim with two main lines of argument.

The first line of argument relies on the claim that there are no structured propositions<sup>2</sup> (a claim which Merricks defends in Chapters 4 and 5). The thought is that if propositions have no structure then they have no form, and hence cannot be truth preserving in virtue of their form.

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<sup>1</sup> See Merricks (2015), p. 1 and p. 35 respectively. Of course more needs to be said about what 'guarantees the truth' means here (on standard accounts of logical consequence a material guarantee is sufficient, as long as it is stable across any argument of the same form).

<sup>2</sup> Merricks (2015), p. 45.

The problem with this argument is that the claim that propositions are not structured does not entail that propositions do not have logical form. More specifically, Merricks's arguments against structured propositions assume a certain (very common) conception of what structured propositions are: one according to which (roughly) propositions have the individuals, properties, and relations that they are intuitively about as constituents or parts. But even if we accept Merricks's arguments that propositions are not structured in this sense, they can still have a form in a sense that is sufficient to set up the notions of logical form or logical validity.

Suppose (as Merricks himself does) that propositions are at least as fine grained as Russellian propositions. Thus, for example, the proposition that Hesperus is bright is not identical to the proposition that  $2+2=4$  and Hesperus is bright, or even to the proposition that Hesperus is bright and Hesperus is bright. Let us also grant that propositions are not structured in the sense relevant to Chapter 4, namely that they do not have the individuals and properties that they are about as parts - indeed, if you want, assume that they are simples, i.e. objects with no parts at all.<sup>3</sup>

All of this is consistent with the claim that each proposition has certain structural properties.<sup>4</sup> For example, consider the structural property *is-of-the-'P-and-Q'-structure*: a property that is had by the proposition that Hesperus is bright and  $2+2=4$  but not had by the proposition that Hesperus is bright. We can also allow for structural relations between propositions. For example, consider the structural relation of *being-the-first-conjunct-of*: the proposition that Hesperus is bright stands in this relation to the proposition that Hesperus is bright and  $2+2=4$ , but not to the proposition that  $2+2=4$  and  $4+4=8$ . We can also consider more general structural relations, such as the relation *has-the-same-propositional-calculus-structure-as* (a relation that relates the proposition that Hesperus is bright and  $2+2=4$  to the proposition that  $2+2=4$  and  $4+4=8$ , but not to the proposition that Hesperus is bright); or the relation *has-the-same-predicate-calculus-structure-as* (a relation that relates the proposition that Hesperus is bright to the proposition that John is tall, but not to the proposition that John is taller than Bill). Finally, we can extend the structural relations *has-the-same-propositional-calculus-structure* or *has-the-same-predicate-calculus-structure* so as to relate propositional arguments, rather than just individual propositions.<sup>5</sup>

Needless to say, on this view such structural properties and relations cannot be analysed in terms of propositions having parts (if they can be analysed at all)<sup>6</sup>, but that does not mean

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the fine-grainedness does not entail that propositions are structured: it is merely a claim about which propositions are identical or distinct. E.g. let 'P' name the proposition that Hesperus is bright, and let 'Q' name the proposition that Hesperus is bright and  $2+2=4$ . We can take a view as to whether P is identical to Q without making any commitments to structure.

<sup>4</sup> This proposal is obviously related to the view defended by Bealer (1998).

<sup>5</sup> We can also define the structural relations between propositional arguments in terms of the structural relations between individual propositions: if x and y are arguments say that then they have the same propositional-calculus structure just in case they (i) x and y have the same number of premises and (ii) the proposition that is the conjunction of all the premises of x and its conclusion has the same propositional-calculus structure as the proposition that is the conjunction of all the premises of y and its conclusion (mutatis mutandis for predicate-calculus structure).

<sup>6</sup> Can these structural properties and relations be analysed at all? One might attempt to analyse them by appealing to structural properties and relations between sentences. Certainly, it seems that

that such properties or relations do not exist or that we cannot grasp them (as the examples above demonstrate - we have a pretty good grasp of what it takes for these relations hold). Furthermore, relying on these structural relations we can easily make sense of logical validity of arguments constituted by propositions: an argument  $x$  is propositionally valid (i.e. valid on the 'propositional calculus' conception) just in case every argument  $y$  that has the same propositional-calculus structure as  $x$  is such that if its premises are true then its conclusion is true; and an argument  $x$  is predicatively-valid (i.e. valid on the 'predicate calculus' conception) just in case every argument  $y$  that has the same predicate-calculus structure as  $x$  is such that if its premises are true then its conclusion is true.

The second line of argument that Merricks presents in favour of the claim that arguments constituted by propositions cannot be logically valid concerns the epistemic purchase of arguments on an ideal reasoner. Here are three principles that Merricks endorses:<sup>7</sup>

**IR1:** If an ideal reasoner believes the premises of a logically valid argument and grasps its conclusion, then she believes the conclusion of that argument.

**IR2:** If an ideal reasoner believes the premises of a logically valid argument, then she does not reject the conclusion of that argument.

**IR3:** If an ideal reasoner grasps the premises and conclusion of a logically valid argument, then she is in a position to know apriori that the conclusion is a consequence of the premises.

Now let us focus on propositional validity, and consider a simple argument (Merricks labels it 'Argument C') constituted by propositions, the premise of which is the proposition that Cicero is an orator, and the conclusion of which is also the proposition that Cicero is an orator. If any argument constituted by propositions is logically valid then surely this one is. But while Merricks acknowledges that the argument satisfies IR1 (trivially, if an agent believes the premise of Argument C then she believes its conclusion), he maintains that the argument fails the latter two requirements, and for similar reasons. With respect to IR2, his worry is that an ideal reasoner might believe that Cicero is an orator, but also believe that Tully is not an orator, and thus (on his view) reject the argument's conclusion. With respect to IR3, the worry is that an agent might know that Cicero is an orator without being in a position to know apriori that it is a consequence of this that Tully is an orator.<sup>8</sup>

I have general reservations about this kind of appeal to 'ideal reasoners', especially as there is no clear criterion for which dimensions of idealisations we ought to focus on. (Note for

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a sufficient condition for two propositions to have the same structure is that they are expressible by two sentences with the same structure. Whether that is also necessary condition depends on whether we think that there are propositions that are not expressible by any sentence. Others might attempt to analyse structure in terms of inferential relations. But at any rate, I do not think one should be required to analyse these structural properties in order to appeal to them.

<sup>7</sup> See Merricks (2015), pp. 37-38. (I have replaced Merricks's talk of understanding a proposition with talk of grasping it because arguably, one only understands sentences. Note also that in p. 42, n. 4 Merricks raises an objection to IR1, but his objection seems to be that the principle is too weak, not that it is false).

<sup>8</sup> See Merricks (2015), pp. 41-42.

example that Merricks assumes that the ideal reasoner can infer Fermat's Last Theorem from the axioms of arithmetic but on the other hand assumes that even though the ideal reasoner knows what each of two synonymous terms mean, she does not necessarily know that they mean the same thing.<sup>9</sup>) But even setting this worry aside, I am not convinced neither that IR2 and IR3 are appropriate requirements on logical validity, nor - more importantly - that Argument C fails to satisfy these requirements.

The first thing to observe is that on sufficiently fine-grained views of propositions (ones of broadly Fregean flavour), the proposition that Cicero is an orator might not be identical to the proposition that Tully is an orator, in which case the validity of Argument C has no bearing on an ideal reasoner's attitude towards the latter proposition – rendering Merricks's worries concerning IR2 and IR3 irrelevant.<sup>10</sup>

Merricks is of course aware of this potential response, but he maintains that a Fregean view of attitude reports cannot save the view that propositional arguments can be logically valid.<sup>11</sup> He notes that while Fregeanism has traditionally focused on the case of proper names, the same problems can be generated by arguments that do not involve any proper names (for example, the argument that has as its premise the proposition that someone is a doctor and as its conclusion the proposition that someone is a physician).

This is an odd complaint, though, because it is clear that any reasonable Fregean view would extend its fine-grainedness to terms other than proper names (namely, the view should also accept that the proposition that John is a doctor is distinct from the proposition that John is a physician). Merricks seems to dismiss the latter idea rather quickly by suggesting that adopting Fregeanism across the board would yield the result that no two sentences ever express the same proposition. But this latter objection does not take into account another important tool that is at the disposal of the Fregean - namely, context sensitivity. The same sentence can express different (Fregean) propositions in different contexts, and on the most promising way of developing a Fregean view, there will be some contexts in which the sentences 'Cicero is an orator' and 'Tully is an orator' express the same proposition (roughly, a context where all agents involved are fully aware of the identity of Cicero and Tully and use the names interchangeably) while in other contexts they express different propositions.<sup>12</sup> These more subtle forms of Fregeanism allow for the following result: there

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<sup>9</sup> To be clear, I have no objection to the claim that ordinary, rational and competent reasoners can be in the predicament of knowing what each of the two terms mean without knowing that they are synonymous. What I'm less clear about is why this kind of predicament shouldn't be ruled out by the idealisation in question.

<sup>10</sup> Recall that we are focusing here on *propositional validity*, so the argument is only valid if it has the form 'P. Therefore, P'.

<sup>11</sup> See Merricks (2015), Chapter 2, §III.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, note that this kind of context sensitivity is motivated by more than just a general wish to maintain that two sentences sometimes express the same proposition. It is motivated more directly by the role of Fregean propositions in giving an adequate account of belief reports. (Thus, for example, while in many contexts it seems false to say 'Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent can fly' in some contexts this is perfectly acceptable – e.g. a context where it is common knowledge among participants in the conversation that Superman is Clark Kent, and where the reporter is focusing on Lois's discovery that the superhero has a flying ability rather than on her ignorance of the identity statement.

are contexts in which ‘Someone is a doctor’ expresses the same proposition as ‘Someone is a physician’ and there are contexts in which they do not. When we make the report: “The ideal reasoner believes (/knows) that someone is doctor but does not believe that someone is a physician’ we are presumably in a context of utterance such that the embedded sentences are used to express *different* propositions and thus where the relevant argument is not logically valid. But this does not entail that the two sentences do not express the same proposition in other contexts.

Suppose, though, that we reject this Fregean view, and insist instead that relative to every context ‘Cicero is an orator’ and ‘Tully is an orator’ express the same proposition. It is still not clear that IR2 and IR3 are violated.

For a start, note that Merricks’s preferred view of propositional attitudes reports is one where such ascriptions are guise-relative.<sup>13</sup> There are different ways to implement this strategy, but for concreteness let us focus on one<sup>14</sup>: suppose that an agent’s total belief state is a set of ordered pairs  $\langle p, g \rangle$  such that  $p$  is a proposition and  $g$  is a guise. Reports such as ‘Jill believes that Cicero is an orator’ express the claim that  $\langle$ the proposition that Cicero is an orator,  $g_0 \rangle$  is included in Jill’s belief state, for some specific guise  $g_0$  (I am not making any commitments here as to how the particular guise gets to be picked out by a particular utterance). The problem is that IR1-IR3 concern epistemic relations between agents and *propositions* (note that these are neither standard belief ascriptions in English – which take the form ‘S believes that  $p$ ’, nor are they the more technical notion of a relation between an agent and a proposition/guise pair). To even make sense of such attributions we need to clarify what, on this framework, we mean when we say that an agent stands in the belief (/knowledge) relation to a proposition  $p$ . The natural answer would be that an agent counts as believing (/knowing) a proposition  $p$  just in case *there is some guise  $g$* , such that  $\langle p, g \rangle$  is included in the agent’s total belief (/knowledge) state.

But with this clarification in place it is hard to see how Argument C poses any threat at all to IR3: after all, an ideal reasoner who knows the proposition that constitutes the premise of this argument (the proposition that Cicero is an orator) *does* know a priori that the proposition that constitutes its conclusion (namely, the proposition that Cicero is an orator) is a consequence of it.<sup>15</sup>

The case of IR2 is a little trickier, in a large part because it we need to be clearer on what is meant by the locution ‘the agent rejects the proposition  $p$ ’. We might interpret ‘rejecting  $p$ ’ as meaning something like: ‘having considered  $p$ , not believing it’. On this interpretation, Argument C does *not* violate IR2 (our ideal reasoner does not fail to believe the proposition that is the conclusion of the argument). And at least if Merricks wants to hold on to his

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<sup>13</sup> Merricks (2015), p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Magidor (2015), pp. 253, 255.

<sup>15</sup> In p. 42, Merricks discusses an ideal reasoner who expresses Argument C using the sentences ‘Cicero is an orator. Therefore, Tully is an orator’ and maintains that “when expressing Argument C in this way the ideal reasoner cannot know a priori that its conclusion is a consequence of its premise”. I think this is wrong: the ideal reasoner does know a priori that (the proposition that is in fact) the conclusion of the argument is a consequence of (the proposition that is in fact) the premise of the argument, even if they do not endorse this claim under the guise ‘premise and conclusion of the argument I just expressed’.

insistence that propositions do not have any logical form (see my discussion above) then he better not define 'rejecting  $p$ ' as 'accepting the negation of  $p$ ' (after all, on this view we cannot make sense of one proposition being the negation of another!).<sup>16</sup> The gloss that Merricks does offer for 'rejecting  $p$ ' is 'believing that  $p$  is false'. But it is not clear that this attitude should make a difference to the *purely logical* coherence of our reasoner's belief system. After all, all sorts of theoretical commitments concerning the nature of truth and falsity might influence what an agent believes about which propositions are false. For example, consider an agent X who is an undergraduate philosophy student who got very excited by his lecture on dialetheism. X incorrectly understood dialetheism to be the view that every proposition is both true and false, and hence concludes that the proposition that Cicero is an Orator is false (as well as true). Or, to take another example, consider an agent Y that takes ' $p$  is false' to simply be shorthand for ' $p$  is not true'. Y believes that Harry is bald, but also thinks that since Harry is only borderline bald it is not true that Harry is bald and thus concludes that it is false that Harry is bald. The agents in these examples may well not be ideal *thinkers* but it is not obvious that their philosophical commitments concerning falsity entail any *purely logical* failing, and thus that they are barred from counting as ideal reasoners in Merricks's sense. In summary, what we make of IR2 depends on what we mean by 'rejecting a proposition'. On some ways to construe this claim, it is not a plausible constraint on logical validity. On others, we have no reason to think Merricks's ideal reasoner violates the constraint. The claim that no arguments constituted by propositions can be logically valid thus requires further defence.

A final remark on this issue: one might raise the following worry. Return to the case of arguments constituted by *sentences*, and consider Merricks's Argument A (p. 35): 'Cicero is an orator. Therefore, Tully is an orator'. This argument is not logically valid (by the lights of either propositional or predicate calculus). And yet it bears a strong link to Argument C (the premise and conclusion of Argument A express the propositions that are, respectively, the premise and conclusion of Argument C). How can we maintain that Argument C is logically valid while Argument A is not?

I do not see any principled problem with having a different verdict concerning the validity of the two arguments. While they might be closely related, the two arguments are not identical. Moreover, focusing on a Tarskian account of logical consequence reveals why the two arguments receive different verdicts: an argument is logically valid if on any uniform (re)interpretation of its non-logical constituents on which its premises are true the conclusion is true. In the sentential Argument A, the names 'Tully' and 'Cicero' are distinct names, and thus the uniformity constraint does not require them to be interpreted in the same way. On the other hand, in Argument C, the persons Cicero and Tully are identical "constituents" and thus the uniformity constraint does require them to be interpreted in

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<sup>16</sup> What if Merricks concedes my suggestion that propositions can have logical form, but still wishes to utilise the 'ideal reasoner' arguments in order to argue that propositional arguments cannot be logically valid? In that case, he could define 'rejecting  $p$ ' as 'believing the negation of  $p$ ', but on that interpretation I maintain that IR2 is not a proper constraint on logical validity, precisely because agents that do not suffer from any logical shortcomings can both believe that Cicero is tall and believe that Tully is not tall.

the same way.<sup>17</sup> If logical validity applies to both propositions and sentences, then one cannot infer from the fact that an argument constituted by proposition is valid that any sentential argument expressing those propositions is also valid (though the converse inference is correct).

## §2 Necessarily existing propositions about contingent beings

According to Merricks, singular propositions are propositions that are “directly about an entity”. The role of his Chapter 5, is to argue that singular propositions do not have the entities that they are directly about as constituents. This in turn constitutes part of Merricks’s sustained argument against structured propositions (where structured propositions are understood as propositions that have the properties and objects that they are about as parts).

In the course of this argument, Merricks develops one of the most interesting aspects of his view: he defends the claim that there are singular propositions that exist necessarily, even though they are (essentially) about entities that exist only contingently.

I do not take this kind of combination of necessiticism about propositions with contingentism about individuals to be obviously incoherent.<sup>18</sup> However, Merricks’s particular way of developing this view is peculiar. This is so because he is committed to ‘serious actualism’, namely that view that “necessarily, an entity exemplifies a property or stands in a relation only if that entity exists” (p. 181). But this seems to commit Merricks to an inconsistent set of claims: if there is a necessarily-existing singular proposition about a contingently existing individual then there are worlds relative to which the proposition exists but the relevant individual does not. Moreover, since Merricks takes a singular proposition about an entity to be essentially about that entity, it follows that there are worlds relative to which the proposition stands in the *aboutness* relation to the individual in question even though that individual does not exist. But this is in direct contradiction to serious actualism.

Merricks’s way of addressing this apparent inconsistency is to deny what he calls ‘the aboutness assumption’: “necessarily, if a proposition is directly about an entity then it stands in a relation to that entity” (p. 186). The problem with this proposal is that, for anyone who doesn’t have general qualms about predicates expressing properties (and I take it Merricks does not have such general qualms), it is hard to see how a sentence of the form ‘ $Rpa$ ’ can be true without  $p$  standing in the relation  $R$  to  $a$ . Furthermore, even those who do have such qualms would presumably just opt for a formulation of serious actualism which is

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<sup>17</sup> I use ‘constituent’ here in a loose sense – that is consistent with the picture suggested above on which propositions do not have ‘constituents’ as parts, but where we can still make sense of an object bearing the relevant structural relation to a proposition.

<sup>18</sup> The tenability of this combination is defended convincingly in Goodman (MS) §4.1 (though Goodman goes on to give an independent argument against first-order contingentism.)

phrased directly in terms of predicates, and does not contain any reference to properties or relations in the first place.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps Merricks is imagining some version of ‘serious actualism’ which is not quite so serious: one that restricts the relational-predicates it ranges over to ones that are in some sense substantive enough (perhaps ones that are sufficiently non-negative or not-too-gerrymandered). But for one thing, *aboutness* seems like a legitimate, non-negative, relation: there is no obvious reason that such a position would exclude aboutness from applying to it. For another, Merricks needs to take care here: if serious actualism is read as a restricted thesis which excludes ‘non-substantive’ predicates then there is a serious risk that it will also exclude the monadic predicates ‘true’ and ‘false’. (After all, if there are any predicates that philosophers have proposed to read in a deflationary manner, it’s the truth predicates!). But this is a conclusion that Merricks cannot accept. The reason is that one of the central arguments of his book – the argument towards the claim that propositions exist necessarily – crucially relies on the claim that necessarily, if a proposition is true (/false), then it exists (p. 18). But if serious actualism is restricted so as to exclude the truth predicates this assumption is unfounded. At the very least, Merricks needs to provide a criterion for why serious actualism fails to apply to ‘about’ while it does apply to the truth predicates.<sup>20</sup>

Assuming that Merricks’s various commitments are - as I have argued - inconsistent, one might wish to ask which of these commitments he should give up. As far as I can see, Merricks has three options here.

The first is to follow Williamson (2002) in denying that there are any contingent entities. Merricks dismisses this possibility off-hand (presumably, because of its counter-intuitiveness) but it is worth reflecting on the implication that adopting this position might have to Merricks’s overall aims. The one issue I can see is that it would undermine Merricks’s main argument in Chapter 5 against structured propositions (if all entities exist necessarily, then there is no problem involving singular propositions having the entities that they are essentially about as constituents). But Merricks has other arguments against structured propositions in Chapter 4, so this might be a price he can accept.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This can be achieved either by using a first-order schema, or by appealing to second-order logic. See e.g. Williamson (2012), §4.1 and Bacon (2013) for such formulations. Moreover, as Bacon (2013), p. 8 notes, even if one accepts a position of the sort that Merricks is proposing which attempts to draw a wedge between relational predicates and relations, one would still end up with a kind of positive free semantics (due to sentences of the form ‘ $Rpa$ ’ being true) and thus my remarks about positive free logic below would apply to this view.

<sup>20</sup> See also my discussion of positive free logic below.

<sup>21</sup> Chapter 4, §III contain one additional argument which does not depend on contingently existing entities, but I find that argument suspect. The argument involves a case where Jane says ‘let ‘ $p$ ’ name the proposition that John entertains at  $t$ ’ and John says ‘let ‘ $q$ ’ name the proposition that Jane entertains at  $t$ ’. Then suppose that at  $t$ , Jane says to herself ‘ $p$  is true’ and John says to himself ‘ $q$  is true’. Merricks maintains that  $p$  is a singular proposition about  $q$  and  $q$  is a singular proposition about  $p$ , so on the constituency view they would be parts of each other, which Merricks argues is

A second option, one which also involves giving up on the commitment to necessarily existing singular propositions about contingently existing entities (and thus on the main argument in chapter 4), is to accept that there are contingently existing beings but deny that there are singular propositions about them. I do not find this position particularly attractive, but Merricks's arguments against this option are, in my view, too quick.

Rather than focusing on the case of singular proposition about entities that actually exist but could have failed to exist, Merricks tries to point to singular propositions about non-existing entities. One such argument involves a journalist who, while Lincoln is still alive, begins to repeatedly utter the sentence 'Lincoln debated a senator'. When the first utterance occurs, Lincoln exists and the utterance uncontroversially expresses a singular proposition about Lincoln. But suppose that unbeknownst to the journalist, at some point during her series of utterances, Lincoln is shot dead (which Merricks takes to be sufficient to ensure that Lincoln ceases to exist). Merricks assumes that since the journalist has not intended to change the meaning of what she is uttering, the post-shooting utterances must also express the same singular proposition (albeit one that is now about an entity that does not exist). But this seems hasty: the case is analogous to one where I point at a (real) table, and repeatedly utter the sentence 'That is a table', thinking that I am referring to the same table all along. But most philosophers of language would agree that if unbeknownst to me the table is replaced between utterances with a different table, my post-replacement utterances express a different proposition, and that if unbeknownst to me the table is replaced by a hallucination of a table, my post-replacement utterance would simply fail to express a proposition.

His second argument involves an egg E and a sperm S. Actually, S and E never unite but they could have united to form an individual. Let 'Norman' pick out the individual that would have existed had S and E united. Norman does not exist, but arguably, there are singular propositions about Norman (for example, the proposition that Norman does not exist). As Merricks recognises, though, even if one accepts the existence of the proposition that Norman does not exist, it not obvious that this proposition is singular. At least one standard theory of empty names maintains that 'Norman' is really a disguised definite description (one that is not actually satisfied but could have been satisfied), and hence that even though there is the (true) proposition that Norman does not exist, this proposition is not *singular*. Merricks imagines the description in question to be 'The individual who would have resulted from the union of S and E' and he objects by maintaining that there is some (perhaps distant) world *w* relative to which S and E unite, but form an individual that is not Norman (call that person 'Shnorman').<sup>22</sup> Merricks's claim is that relative to *w*, Shnorman is not

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untenable. The problem with this argument, however, is that it seems dangerously close to being a version of the truth-teller paradox, and thus it is far from clear that Jane and John's attempted dubbings have succeeded in picking up any proposition at all. (Compare this with the case that Jane says to herself '*p* is false' and John says to himself '*q* is true' which would be a version of the Liar Paradox.)

<sup>22</sup> I note in passing that the specific case that Merricks uses to support this claim (p. 177) is one where S and E form twins. But this twinning case would not advance Merricks's argument: arguably, in the twinning world Merricks's description fails to pick out *any* individual (on pain of failure of uniqueness). Nevertheless, for the sake of discussion I will grant him that there is a world in which S and E unite to form a unique individual who is not Norman.

Norman but Shnorman *is* the individual that would have resulted from the union of S and E and thus the descriptive hypothesis fails. The problem with this objection, however, is that it ignores the standard move that defenders of ‘names as descriptions’ typically make – namely rigidifying the relevant descriptions. Thus if ‘Norman’ is instead construed as standing for ‘The individual who such that, if *actually* S and E would have united, then they would have been formed’, then relative to *w*, the description would not pick-out Shnorman. (The idea is that relative to any world the description would pick out an individual that is formed in the S+E world that is closest to the actual world, if it picks out anything – and thus relative to any world the description would either be empty or pick out the same individual Norman.)

Given these difficulties, it is somewhat surprising that Merricks did not opt for a much simpler argument for the possibility of singular propositions about non-existent objects: since he takes propositions to exist necessarily, ordinary objects to exist contingently, and singular propositions to be essentially about the object that they are actually about, then presumably any ordinary singular proposition about an ordinary object should have been sufficient for his purposes. (Consider for example the proposition that Obama is president – Merricks is committed to this proposition’s being essentially about Obama, and he is also committed to there being a world relative to which this proposition exists while Obama does not...). But of course, Merricks’s insistence that there can be singular propositions about contingently existing beings leaves us with the problem we started out with: namely that this stance inconsistent with his commitment to serious actualism.

This brings me to the final option. If Merricks wishes to retain his commitment to necessarily existing propositions which are essentially about contingently existing beings the most promising move would be to simply abandon serious actualism and adopt a version of positive free logic (or rather semantics).<sup>23</sup> This would allow him to accept that the proposition that Lincoln debated a senator is a singular proposition about Lincoln even if Lincoln does not exist, and hence would leave his attack of structured singular propositions intact.<sup>24</sup>

The problem with this proposal, however, is that it’s in tension with another argument, which seems very central to Merricks’s overall project: namely his argument in chapter 2 that propositions exist necessarily. The argument goes like this: (i) The premises and conclusions of modally valid arguments are propositions. (ii) There are some modally valid arguments with premises or conclusions that are necessarily true or necessarily false. (iii) Necessarily, if a premise (/conclusion) is true (/false) then it exists. Thus propositions exist necessarily.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Bacon (2013).

<sup>24</sup> Admittedly, Merricks raises the interesting challenge in this connection (Merricks (2015), p. 182): if one adopts positive free logic, then presumably one could in principle accept the view that singular propositions have the objects they are about as parts, even if those objects do not exist (because the relation ‘being a part of’ might not be existence-entailing in its first argument). This is a fair point, though I take it that even defenders of positive free semantics take *some* properties and relations to be existence entailing. Thus it is typical for such views to take more intentional properties such as *being about*, *referring to*, or *depicting* to be existence entailing in their second argument, while taking *part of* (particularly when involving physical objects) to be existence entailing.

As Besson (2016) rightly points out, a major problem with this argument is that even if otherwise successful, it would at best show that propositions that are necessarily true or necessarily false exist necessarily (not, as Merricks concludes, that *all* propositions exist necessarily). But even if we grant Merricks that if some propositions exist necessarily then they all do, the argument would run into trouble on the current framework. This is so because on a positive free semantics a proposition can be true at a world even if it does not exist.

In summary, the problem is this: the argument in Chapter 4 against structured propositions requires there to be necessarily existing singular propositions about contingently existing beings. The only consistent way to maintain this commitment is to adopt a positive free semantics. But adopting a positive free semantics undermines the very argument that was supposed to establish that propositions exist necessarily in the first place. In the absence of other reasons to accept that propositions exist necessarily, the argument of chapter 4 thus fails.

### §3. Remarks on the nature of propositions

Let me conclude this piece with two remarks on the overall vision of propositions that Merricks defends.

First remark: one central question concerning the nature of proposition is *how fine grained are propositions?* Merricks seems committed to a specific answer to this question: propositions are more fine-grained than sets of worlds (thus he takes the proposition that it's raining to be distinct from the proposition that it's raining and  $2+2=4$ ) but less fine-grained than Fregean propositions (thus he take the proposition that Tully is an orator to be identical to the proposition that Cicero is an orator).<sup>25</sup>

But these commitments are defended with rather quick passing remarks. For example, we are told (p. 20) that that the proposition that it is raining is distinct from the proposition that it is raining and  $2+2=4$  because they are *about* different things. But defenders of propositions-are-as-coarse-grained-as-sets-of-worlds might reasonably argue that the propositions are *not* about different things: rather, some sub-sentential terms in the sentences used to express these propositions (e.g. '2', '4', and so forth) are 'about' different things. Once the contents of those sub-sentential terms are compositionally combined to yield a proposition, they yield precisely the same proposition in both cases. We are also told (again in p. 20) that the two propositions are distinct because they differ how they represent things as being. But defenders of coarse-grained propositions might reasonably argue that the two propositions *do not* differ in how they represent things as being: arguably, both propositions represent things as being such that they are among that set of situations in which it is raining (which is exactly the same set of situations in which it is raining and  $2+2=4$ ). On the other hand we are told that the proposition that Cicero is an orator represents things as being the same way as the proposition that Tully is an orator (p. 40). But it is not clear why we accept this: after all, defenders of Fregean propositions might reasonably argue that the former proposition represents things in a Cicero-ish way, while

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<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Merricks (2015):19-20, 40.

the latter, in a Tully-ish way - a difference in representation, which is relevant to the semantics of belief reports.

Moreover, note that Merricks's commitment to propositions being (roughly) as fine-grained as Russellian proposition is somewhat undermotivated given that he rejects some of the reasons that have traditionally pulled others to accept this view. For example, he cannot be motivated to think that propositions need to be relatively fine-grained because of Frege's puzzle, as he anyhow takes belief ascriptions to have truth conditions that are relative to modes of presentations (a solution that those committed to very coarse grained propositions can also avail themselves of<sup>26</sup>). Nor can he be motivated by the claim that propositions literally *are* Russellian proposition, as he goes into lengths to argue against this view. Finally, given the threat of the Russell-Myhill paradox, Merricks might have a positive reason to prefer a view on which propositions are less fine-grained.

Of course (paradox aside), any position one takes on the issue fineness of grain is consistent with the claim that propositions are not structured (in the sense of having parts) and that they represent things as being a certain way primitively. But I think it would have been preferable for Merricks either to have provided a more extensive discussion of the issue of fineness of grain, or alternatively to have refrained from taking a position on this issue altogether.

Second remark: Merricks offers substantial arguments in support the claim that propositions represent things as being a certain way *primitively* rather than via having a certain structure. But I am still left with the question of why we should think of propositions as being *representational* at all? After all, there is a natural view on which propositions are simply the limit case of *properties* (indeed, this view is manifested in the standard semantics for first-order logic, where  $n$ -place predicates are assigned  $n$ -place properties, and zero-order predicates are assigned propositions). And we do not usually think of properties as *representing* objects as being a certain way: properties simply *are* the ways for objects to be. By analogy, then, it seems natural to think of propositions as simply *being* the ways for things to be (rather than *representing* the ways for things to be). Moreover, it seems to me that this alternative view sit rather comfortably with the other components of Merricks's overall vision: one on which propositions are simple, exist necessarily, and are the fundamental bearers of truth.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Magidor (2015), n. 13.

<sup>27</sup> Thanks to Corine Besson for helpful comments on this piece.

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