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UNITY WITHOUT TRUTH?

CONTRA TRUEMAN'S IDENTITY THEORY

JULIAN DODD

1. Robert Trueman, in his 2022, elaborates what he terms an “immodest” identity theory of truth. It’s an identity theory because, according to him, a true proposition does not *correspond* to a fact; it *is* a fact (2022, p. 195). And it’s an immodest such theory because, again according to him, the facts with which true propositions are identical are things whose totality is the world (2022, p. 101): what Trueman calls “obtaining states of affairs” (2022, p. 97). For Trueman, as for John McDowell (1994, pp. 27-28), the world is literally made up of the sort of thing we can think.¹

2. As Trueman explains, his identity theory is the product of two elements. The first is what he terms his “Fregean realism about facts” (2022, p. 96). Fregean realism is the following conjunction:

- (1) Every semantically significant type of expression can be replaced with a corresponding variable, which can then be bound by a quantifier.
- (2) Different types of variable have disjoint ranges of values. (Trueman 2022, p. 96)

Since names *refer* to objects and (declarative) sentences *say that* things are thus-and-so, names and sentences are expressions of different logico-semantic types. So it follows from Fregean realism that name-variables and sentence-variables have disjoint ranges of values: *objects* and *ways for things to be*, respectively. Accordingly, “*ways for things to be* must not be confused with a type of object: you cannot refer to these *ways* with names; you can only express them with whole sentences” (2022, p. 97).

¹ Frege holds an identity theory, but, unlike Trueman and McDowell, a modest one. For Frege, facts are true propositions (Frege 1918, p.342), but propositions are structured entities built up out of modes of presentation of worldly entities, not those entities themselves. Frege thus “rip[s] the facts out of the world” (Trueman 2021, p. 194).

With Fregean realism in place, Trueman’s Fregean realism about facts is as follows (2022, p. 97). Among the ways for things to be are *ways things are* and *ways things aren’t*. Ways things are – facts – are obtaining states of affairs: objects and properties combined as they really are in the world. Ways things aren’t are unobtaining states of affairs: such combinations that are not part of how the world really is.

The second element of Trueman’s immodest identity theory is his favoured “prenective view” of propositional attitude-reports (2018, §6; 2021, ch. 12; 2022, pp. 98-99). According to him, the logical form of

(3) Kathryn believes that Yorkshire is cold,

is represented as

(4) [Kathryn] believes [Yorkshire is cold].

(4) represents (3) as comprising a name at one end, a sentence at the other, and a *prenective*, ‘**x** believes **P**’, joining them together.²

Trueman claims that once these two elements are combined, an immodest identity theory follows swiftly. The prenective view has it that a proposition is a way for things to be and, hence, that “[a] true proposition ... is a way things are. But according to Fregean realism about facts, a way things are is a fact. So true propositions are facts” (2022, p. 99).

3. Trueman is well aware how controversial his position is. Indeed, towards the end of his 2022 (pp. 106-115) he explicitly addresses “the individuation problem”: namely, that it seems that ways for things to be must be finer grained *qua* propositions than *qua* states of affairs. Puzzlingly, however, he has nothing to say here about a problem for immodest identity theories that has an equally distinguished pedigree. This is what I shall call *the problem of unity without truth*, and it goes like this (Dodd 2000, pp. 164-166).

² I follow Trueman in using emboldened sans serif letters to mark gaps where, in this case, a singular term and sentence can go, respectively (Trueman 2021, p. 26).

States of affairs (*i.e.* propositions) are, as Trueman agrees, structured entities: specifically, combinations of objects, properties, and the like. “As a general rule”, Trueman says, an n -adic property is an entity which becomes a state of affairs when it is combined with n objects” (2021, p. 148). But if (to keep things simple) a combination of an object and a property is to play the role of a proposition – a thing we can think, and which characterises the world as thus-and-so – it cannot be a mere *aggregation* of these items; it must be a *unity*: a candidate for being the case. Yet how can these entities be unified without the proposition being true? Suppose, for example, that it is false that Yorkshire is cold. How can Yorkshire (the county) and *is cold* (the property) nonetheless “hang one in another” (Wittgenstein 1922, §2.03) to form a proposition? Or, to flip over the coin, how can the said object and property be unified into a state of affairs? The problem here is that the sole model we have of how the county and the property can hang together in a unity is this: by virtue of the county *actually having* the property: that is, by virtue of *Yorkshire actually being cold*. And this means that the state of affairs obtains; the proposition is true (Cartwright 1987, p. 84). There can be no false propositions, no unobtaining states of affairs. Or so it seems.

One way of side-stepping this problem would be to deny that propositions (*i.e.* states of affairs) are structured. After all, unity problems do not arise for unstructured entities. This observation does not help Trueman, however: as we have just seen, he thinks that states of affairs are structured, all right.³ But even if we agree that states of affairs *are* structured, might the

³ In his 2022 Trueman announces that he has changed his mind with respect to how best to respond to the individuation problem. Rather than recommending, as he once did (Trueman 2021, p. 202), that we individuate ways for things to be as finely as we intuitively individuate propositions, he now proposes that we individuate such ways as coarsely as we intuitively individuate states of affairs (2022, 115). As an anonymous referee points out, what Trueman means by this proposed coarsening is that ways for things to be are identical just in case they are necessarily equivalent (Trueman 2021, p. 201); and a counterintuitive consequence of this proposal, for the structured view of propositions/states of affairs, is that everything there is is a constituent of the one and only necessary proposition/state of affairs. But in what sense, the said referee asks, would this proposition/state of affairs really be structured? And so, given the force of this question, how can it be right for me to ascribe unambiguously to Trueman a conception of ways for things to be as structured entities?

I have two observations to make about this. First, the main thread of this paper – that Trueman’s immodest identity theory is vulnerable to the perennial problem of unity without truth – relies merely on Trueman’s own *assertion* that states of affairs/propositions are structured. And as we have seen, he explicitly commits to this doctrine in his 2021 and does not recant in his 2022. (Indeed, in the latter piece he remains happy to characterise facts as objects instantiating properties (2022, p. 106), which certainly seems to presuppose the structured conception.) So I conclude that Trueman *does* consistently commit himself to the conception of propositions/states of affairs as structured, even though this conception is placed under a certain amount of pressure by the way in which he chooses to deal with the individuation problem in his 2022. How this pressure is best dealt with is an issue for him, not me, obviously.

problem of unity without truth nonetheless be confected? For is not the property *is cold* what results from simply removing an object from a way for things to be? And, hence, is not the item that results from completing the property with an object a way for things to be, without being automatically, as it were, a way things are? So whence the pressure to say that the resulting way for things to be (*i.e.* the resulting state of affairs) must be a way things are (*i.e.* a state of affairs that obtains)? But this manoeuvre, slick though it is, only appears plausible by virtue of assuming what must be explained: the assumption it starts from – namely, that Yorkshire and the property of being cold *can* be unified into a state of affairs without this state of affairs obtaining – is precisely what puzzles us. Given Trueman’s account of what the constituents of the state of affairs *Yorkshire is cold* are – Yorkshire and *is cold* – it is the very possibility of these items being unified without Yorkshire being cold that is moot.

4. So, kosher problem that it is, how can Trueman solve it? We look in vain for an answer in his 2022, but he does address the problem, albeit at considerable speed, in his earlier book (2021, pp. 199-201). This is what he says.

First, Trueman alleges that framing the problem in the way I just have – in terms of how the constituents of a state of affairs can be unified without that state of affairs obtaining – is to abandon Fregean realism and treat both the property *is cold* and the state *Yorkshire’s being cold* as *objects*, that is, as things named by singular terms (2021, p. 200).

Second, and in a somewhat condensed passage, he argues that once this mistake has been rectified, the problem dissolves. Given Fregean realism, the only way of expressing a state of affairs is with a sentence, and the only way of picking out a property is with a predicate. So, Trueman argues, we can only express the relation that unites Yorkshire and *is cold* into a state of affairs (obtaining or unobtaining) by saying something of the form:

(5) *U* (Yorkshire, is cold, Yorkshire is cold),

Second, and more substantially, I suspect that the counterintuitive consequence in question is actually one that Trueman would be inclined to brush off. In response to an objection of a roughly similar kind – namely, that he is committed to {Daniel} being a constituent of the state of affairs *Daniel loves Simon* – he says that all this “really show[s] is that a single state of affairs can be decomposed in multiple ways (2021, p. 156). So perhaps Trueman would not, after all, regard the conclusion that everything there is is a constituent of the one and only necessary proposition/state of affairs as a *reductio* of the structured conception of such entities.

in which ‘*U*’ represents the unifying relation and (5) says, roughly, that this relation unifies Yorkshire and *is cold* into that particular way for things to be. However, Trueman continues, ‘*is cold*’ appears in (5) as a monadic predicate, and so it comes with an argument-place. This argument-place, he says, “cannot just be left dangling”; something “must be done” with it (2021, p. 201). And so “the only sensible suggestion”, he contends, is that this argument-place should be filled by ‘Yorkshire’, thereby giving us

(6) *U*(Yorkshire is cold, Yorkshire is cold) (2021, p. 201).

(6), needless to say, means that the claim that Yorkshire and *is cold* compose the state of affairs of Yorkshire’s being cold has become the claim that *Yorkshire is cold* bears a certain relation to itself. Since, “presumably, the relation that matters here is identity” (2021, p. 201), and since, at Trueman’s suggestion (2021, §11.1), Fregean realism demands that the identity relation for states be expressed using ‘ $\Box(\mathbf{P} \leftrightarrow \mathbf{Q})$ ’, (6) finally morphs into

(7) $\Box(\text{Yorkshire is cold} \leftrightarrow \text{Yorkshire is cold})$,

which is a blatant truism (2021, p. 201).⁴ That we have ended up here reveals that the problem that we started with – namely, explaining the unity of states of affairs (*i.e.* propositions) – dematerializes under analysis.

But not so fast. While it might at first *seem* that the problem of unity without truth relies on a conception of states of affairs as complex objects built out of simpler objects, it does not do so. True enough, I have used the apparent singular terms, ‘Yorkshire’s being cold’ and ‘the state of affairs of Yorkshire’s being cold’, and my doing so violates, strictly speaking, the Fregean realist thesis that such states can only be expressed using complete sentences. But then Trueman himself does exactly the same thing, using the expression ‘the state *snow is purple*’ in the course of saying that this state does not obtain (2022, pp. 101-102), and using the expression ‘the world’ in name-position to say that the world is the totality of facts (2022, p. 102). In so doing, Trueman talks of states as if they were objects, rather than ways for things to be, and appears to identify –

⁴ Here the emboldened sans serif upper case letters mark gaps for sentences (2021, p. 150).

incoherently, by his own lights – the referent of ‘the world’, a seemingly grand object, with the totality of facts, which is really the infinite conjunction of all the ways things are.

Trueman resists the accusation that he falls foul of his own Fregean realism by presenting such apparent slips as heuristically useful “loose talk” (2022, p. 101): rough-and-ready ways of gesturing at claims that need to be more carefully formulated. But if he can make this move, then so can I. I can adopt Fregean realism and, with it, Trueman’s way of evading the charge that the occasional apparent use of singular terms to pick out states of affairs and properties convicts me of thinking of these items as objects. So let us say, echoing Trueman, that my use of such misleading expressions is just knowingly loose talk: properties are, indeed, intrinsically ‘gappy’ and only capable of being picked out by predicates; ways for things to be, meanwhile, are only capable of being expressed by sentences. Neither kind of item are objects, even though my loose talk, if taken strictly, suggests that they are. But notice how, once this point has been granted, the problem of the unity of the state of affairs remains. How can such ‘gappy’ entities as properties be completed by objects without their completion being an obtaining state of affairs, *i.e.* without things really being thus-and-so? This question is real and pressing, even for a Fregean realist.

Having responded in this way to the first part of Trueman’s reply, the way is clear to reply to the second part. The misstep is the transition from (5) to (6). It is true that predicates only appear in sentences with their argument-places filled, and an analogous claim holds for properties as they figure in states of affairs. But, *pace* Trueman, these ‘gappy’ entities can nonetheless be considered *as* gappy, abstracted from any filling of their argument-places: indeed, it is only by doing this that we can internalise *the difference* between an object and a property, between a name and a predicate. This, precisely, is how ‘is cold’ appears in (5), which, in effect, says that there has to be an explanation as to how Yorkshire can complete the ‘gappy’ entity, *being cold*, to deliver a state of affairs (either obtaining or non-obtaining). It is quite acceptable for a predicate, *qua* ‘gappy’ entity, to be displayed in this way, abstracted from its completion: indeed, it is no less acceptable than it is to display a name outside of its occurrence in a sentence. Hence, we can accept Trueman’s Fregean realism, acknowledging the difference between name and predicate, and the corresponding difference between object and property, without thinking that a predicate can only appear in (5) with its argument-place or places actually filled. And what this means is that we are under no compunction to move from (5) to (6). So it does not follow that (5) must mutate, via (6), into the truistic (7). Trueman’s apparent escape route is blocked.

5. Trueman's immodest identity theory is unsustainable unless and until he can find a more convincing reply to the unity without truth problem. While we wait for such, we might also consider the soundness of his derivation of this theory from Fregean realism about facts and the prenecutive account of judgment.⁵ But that's a topic for another paper.

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⁵ Notably, A.N. Prior, the originator of the prenecutive view, takes it to imply not, with Trueman, that propositions are ways for things to be, but that there are no such things as propositions (Prior 1971, ch. 1, esp. p. 5).

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