

# Limits of Propositionalism

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**Abstract**

Propositionalists hold that, fundamentally, all attitudes are propositional attitudes. A number of philosophers have recently called the propositionalist thesis into question. It has been argued, successfully I believe, that there are attitudes that are of or about things but which do not have a propositional content concerning those things. If correct, our theories of mind will include non-propositional attitudes as well as propositional attitudes. In light of this, Neil Sinhababu's (2015) recent attack on anti-propositionalists is noteworthy. The present paper aims to sharpen his worries and show that they fail for a range of reasons. Besides merely offering a reply, considering his challenges provides an opportunity to add clarity to this emerging area of research and it allows one to strengthen the case against propositionalism more generally.

**Keywords**

Propositional Attitudes, Non-propositional Attitudes, Content, Propositions, Intensional Transitive Verbs

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# 1. Introduction

Propositionalists hold that, fundamentally, all attitudes are propositional attitudes. So, according to propositionalists, when it is true that one, say, likes Sally or loves the dog in the corner, it is true because one is in a state with a propositional content – perhaps by liking that Sally is nice, loving that the dog in the corner is well behaved, or by having some appropriate set of beliefs and desires with appropriate propositional contents. A number of philosophers have recently called the propositionalist thesis into question.<sup>1</sup> It has been argued, successfully I believe, that there are attitudes that are of or about things but which do not have a propositional content concerning those things. If correct, our theories of mind will include non-propositional attitudes as well as propositional attitudes. Moreover, positive accounts of such attitudes have now been offered<sup>2</sup> and non-propositional attitudes are being utilized in fruitful ways in the philosophy of mind.<sup>3</sup> In light of this, Neil Sinhababu's (2015) recent attack on anti-propositionalists is noteworthy. He argues that anti-propositionalists fail to properly individuate various mental states and he calls the very existence of non-propositional attitudes into question by arguing that they can't play the roles required of them in our psychological explanations. Considering his challenges provides an opportunity to add clarity to this emerging area of research and it allows one to strengthen the case against propositionalism.

The present paper proceeds as follows. First, I explain Sinhababu's two criticisms. Second, I pressure the motivations for his criticisms by clarifying the anti-propositionalist position and I show that both of his criticisms depend on an ability to capture apparently non-propositional facts in propositionalist-friendly terms. Third, I argue that Sinhababu's strategy for capturing the non-propositional facts systematically fails. Fourth, I briefly consider how

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<sup>1</sup> See Ben-Yami (1997), Brewer (2006), Crane (2001), Grzankowski (2012), Merricks (2009), Montague (2007), and Thagard (2006).

<sup>2</sup> See Grzankowski (2013, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Bengson, Grube, and Korman (2011), Bengson and Moffett (2011), and Mendelovici (2013).

propositionalists might avoid the systematic problem I level against Sinhababu but argue that propositionalism would still remain unmotivated and would continue to face difficult challenges.

These points constitute two important advances for anti-propositionalists in the broader dialectic, points that should be of wider interest. First, in the existing literature, propositionalists have been given a number of difficult cases and they have been asked to offer analyses or other reductive treatments of apparently non-propositional attitudes. One important way of doing so (and it is in fact Sinhababu's way) is to hold that ascriptions of apparently non-propositional attitudes are elliptical for propositional attitude ascriptions.<sup>4</sup> Rather than waiting for the next clever, propositionalist move on this front, I argue that *any* such propositionalist treatment will face the problem of overprediction that I level against Sinhababu and that the most natural retreat is unpromising. Second, arguments in favor of propositionalism are hard to find in the literature. Sinhababu's paper is important in large part because it constitutes an attempt to explicitly motivate a position that is often tacitly accepted. My clarifications of the anti-propositionalist position and my discussion of Sinhababu's motivations show that propositionalists have little to fear from the expansive theory of mind anti-propositionalists are offering.

## 2. Sinhababu's Criticisms

Non-propositional attitudes feature in common psychological explanations. For instance: The reason that I'm not going to the party tonight is that I believe only gin will be served and *I hate gin*. Lex Luthor avoids the Fortress of Solitude because he suspects Superman

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<sup>4</sup> Similar attempts can be found in Larson et. al. (1997), Quine (1956), and Searle (1983). Quine's position is couched in terms of regimentations of English into first-order logic rather than hidden linguistic material, but the upshot is roughly the same and open the same criticism leveled against Sinhababu.

is there and *he fears Superman*. Bill wants to go to the bar because he heard John will be there and *Bill loves John*. John wants to go to the bar too, but it's because he heard that Bill will be there and *he hates Bill* – he needs to have a word with him. Propositionalists aim to render the intentional aspects of such psychological explanations in terms of propositional attitudes only – although liking, fearing, loving, and hating might appear to be non-propositional attitudes (our ascriptions of them feature noun phrase grammatical objects rather than complement clauses), looks are deceiving.

Sinhababu wishes to defend propositionalism. He argues that once we appreciate the demands of a psychological theory, we will see that propositionalism has advantages that make it too good to be false. Moreover, one gets the sense from Sinhababu's criticisms that there is simply no place in a complete and final theory of mind for non-propositional attitudes – they are left looking as if they do no work. In short, upon careful philosophical examination, we will see that there are no non-propositional attitudes.

The core of Sinhababu's criticisms has it that anti-propositionalists cannot individuate attitudes finely enough and that for this reason we must hold that the attitudes that appear to be non-propositional are in fact propositional. He brings to bear two kinds of considerations in support of this worry. First, he argues that anti-propositionalism fails to capture some simple inferential patterns that propositionalists easily capture. Second, he argues that anti-propositionalists cannot provide simple explanations of behavior, action, and motivation. In turn, let's consider these points and how they speak to the worry that, whereas propositionalists individuate mental states correctly, anti-propositionalists don't individuate them finely enough.

Starting with inferential patterns, consider a pair of subjects who we are inclined to say desire Johnny Depp. Suppose we are inclined to hold that 'Jenny desires Depp' and 'Charles desires Depp' are both true. It certainly seems to follow that 'Jenny and Charles desire the same

thing' is true too. But Sinhababu believes that this is a bad inference and he provides a putative counterexample. Suppose that Charles is a cannibal who would be satisfied only in situations in which he eats Depp but not in situations where he merely chats with him. Jenny, on the other hand, is a big fan of Depp and she would be satisfied in situations in which she spends the afternoon talking to Depp. Sinhababu's claim is that we would be reluctant to maintain that Charles and Jenny desire the same thing, but anti-propositionalists seem committed to the view that they do. Propositionalists, on the other hand, are in a position to make finer distinctions between desires. A propositionalist would have it that *a complete description* of our subjects' desires are as follows: 'Jenny desires that she talk with Depp' and 'Charles desires that he eat Depp'.<sup>5</sup> Whereas propositionalists can block the inference to the conclusion 'Charles and Jenny desire the same thing,' Sinhababu holds that anti-propositionalists cannot. Since we do not wish to say 'Jenny and Charles desire the same thing' even when we wish to say 'Jenny desires Depp' and 'Charles desires Depp' things must be more complicated than they appear to be on the surface. Since propositionalists can easily capture the inferential patterns, an attractive fleshing out of the underlying complication is that Charles and Jenny are, despite appearances, really said to have propositional desires.

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<sup>5</sup> This actually isn't quite right, since it might be that Jenny wouldn't be satisfied if Depp were mean to her while they were chatting and Charles might not be satisfied if he ate Depp covered in wasabi. Specifying the content of a desire is harder than one might think and this is a real problem for propositionalists (though not a problem that favors anti-propositionalism, rather, it is a shared problem). Interestingly, the resources propositionalists utilize in overcoming this problem may well be available to non-propositionalists too. For instance, suppose that propositionalists suggest dealing with the wasabi case by appealing to other mental states of Charles's – perhaps other (propositional) desires of his. There is no reason anti-propositionalists couldn't do the same when (and if) they face problems of underspecification. As noted below in the main text, anti-propositionalists needn't deny that there are propositional attitudes. Thanks to Neil Sinhababu for pressing the underspecification worry in conversation. See Fara (2013) and Braun (2015) for a discussion of the underspecification of desire attributions.

Turn now to claim that anti-propositionalists cannot provide simple explanations of behavior, action, and motivation. Suppose we are inclined to hold that Jenny desires chocolate, desires a diamond necklace, desires a goldfish, and desires Johnny Depp. Sinhababu holds that by ascribing such states, we miss distinctions that we need to make if we are going to make sense of Jenny's behavior. In particular, understanding when Jenny will be satisfied and how she will be motivated demands finer grained distinctions. Suppose Jenny would be satisfied in situations in which she *eats* chocolate, *talks* with Johnny Depp, *wears* a necklace, and *owns* a goldfish. Further, suppose Jenny would be motivated to *meet* Depp, *visit* a pet shop, *put on* a necklace, and *eat* some chocolate. It's plausible (or at least possible) that she wouldn't be satisfied if she were given a goldfish to wear or had Depp to eat. She wouldn't be motivated to eat a goldfish or put some chocolate on her face. Construing her desires non-propositionally doesn't allow us to draw these differences in motivation and satisfaction. Sinhababu worries that anti-propositionalists can only tell us which objects Jenny desires, but in order to explain her behavior and understand her actions, we need to know more. Sinhababu concludes that since we do in fact successfully predict and explain behavior in many situations, when we look to be ascribing non-propositional attitudes, there is really more to the story. Once again, propositionalists, with their finer grained distinctions, seem better positioned than anti-propositionalists and so we have reason for thinking that, appearances not withstanding, our explanations of behavior are really propositional attitude explanations.

Sinhababu argues that similar points to those just offered for desire apply to liking and fearing. For instance, he tells us: '[P]eople who like different aspects of chocolate shouldn't be regarded as liking the same thing. If Tim likes to taste chocolate and Lou likes to look upon its smooth brown surface, Tim and Lou like different things. We wouldn't describe them as liking the same thing, or as sharing each other's likings' (12). In cases of fearing, we might want to distinguish between someone whose level of fright increases as he gets closer to a snake and someone else whose fright increases as he watches a snake eat a mouse. If we simply say they

both fear the snake, we can't account for a clear difference in motivation. Rather, we must seek finer grained distinctions. We should say that one fears being near snakes while the other fears that the snake will eat the mouse. Similar considerations apply to loving and hating and presumably, if Sinhababu is correct, to any other candidate non-propositional attitude.

These criticisms of anti-propositionalism can be dealt with. Moreover, working through them provides an opportunity to clarify and strengthen the position.

### **3. Replies**

#### ***3.1 The Scope of Anti-Propositionalism***

Some points of clarification are in order. In defending anti-propositionalists, I want to focus on fearing, liking, loving, and hating rather than on desiring since I think they are better candidates for having non-propositional instances. Although some anti-propositionalists argue that there are desires that aren't propositional, I think this may well be a mistake. If the definitive role of desire is to motivate and/or determine when subjects will be satisfied, I think we will always need propositional desires, just as Sinhababu holds. (Whether that is indeed the definitive role of desire ought to be questioned, but presently I'll put that to one side.)

Furthermore, there is good linguistic evidence that ascriptions that appear to ascribe non-propositional desires are in fact concealed propositional ascriptions (more on this below).<sup>7</sup> But the considerations that make it attractive to take desire to be a propositional attitude in all instances do not extend to many other cases. Liking, loving, fearing, and hating constitute far more promising candidates for having non-propositional instances and so I think it is there that anti-propositionalists should plant their flag.

Drawing this difference between desiring and, say, fearing or liking brings out a very important dialectical point. Anti-propositionalists do not think that there fail to be propositional

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<sup>7</sup> See Forbes (2006), Larson et. al. (1997), and Searle (1983).



attitudes – belief and desire are great candidates. In fact, not only do anti-propositionalists think there are propositional attitudes such as belief and desire, they think there are *both* propositional and non-propositional instances of mental states such as fearing, liking, loving, and hating. I might like Sally and I might like that Sally is in town this week. I might fear Rover and I might fear that Rover has been harmed. The key anti-propositionalist claim is simply that *some* attitudes fail to be propositional. In the face of a long tradition of theorizing about propositional attitudes almost exclusively, this is a bold thesis, even without desire on the table.

Sinhababu's criticisms center on the thought that anti-propositionalists lack the resources to make distinctions where distinctions are needed. But once it is seen that anti-propositionalists wish to *expand* the resources of a theory of mind rather than constrict it, Sinhababu's criticisms look far less threatening. Anti-propositionalists can and should agree to much of what Sinhababu says. There are indeed cases where propositional contents are called for. But this in no way shows that we *don't* need non-propositional attitudes too. In wondering, for example, why one subject but not another undergoes occurrent episodes of fear in the face of snakes, we might note that the first fears snakes but the other does not. Perhaps the other *likes* snakes. (More on explanations like this below.) At the moment, I wish to make a quite modest but important point: when Sinhababu provides cases that appear to demand appeal to propositional attitudes in order to make finer grained distinctions, anti-propositionalists needn't be threatened since they should agree that there are propositional instances of fearing, liking, loving, and so on. It's hard to see how offering cases that call for propositional attitudes pose a problem for a theorist with all of Sinhababu's resources and more still. What Sinhababu needs to show is not that we need propositional attitudes (everyone should agree to that), but that the expanded theory is superfluous or problematic or perhaps both. Sinhababu himself isn't sufficiently clear on this front, but let us proceed with the above clarifications in mind so that we can strengthen the propositionalists' case.

Return to Sinhababu's two lines of attack – worries about inferential patterns and worries about predicting behavior and motivation. Sinhababu could take the above clarifications to heart and recognize that anti-propositionalists hold that *only some* attitudes fail to be propositional, but he might then argue (i) that the inferences predicted by anti-propositionalists are incorrect, so the ontological expansion is problematic and (ii) that unless we are told what work the non-propositional attitudes are doing with respect to our explanations of behavior and action, they look like idle posits. But even these sharpened challenges can be met. In sections 3.2 and 3.3 I will show that both objections rest on the same unpaid debt. In section 3.4, I will show that the debt cannot be paid.

### ***3.2 The Inferential Worry***

For the inferential worry to get a hold, it must be the case that inferences such as the following are bad inferences:

- A. Jenny likes Depp.
- B. Charles likes Depp.
- C. So, Jenny and Charles like the same thing.

It is not at all obvious to me that this is a bad inference. How could it be? We are offered two relational truths with a shared relatum and our inferential pattern is simple existential generalization. So one immediate reply to Sinhababu is that the inference is a perfectly good one.<sup>8</sup> But suppose one also feels the pull of Sinhababu's intuition about the inference. Anti-propositionalists can give an explanation of why we might have that intuition, that is, the intuition that Jenny, the fan, and Charles, the cannibal, fail to like the same thing. As ontological expansionists, anti-propositionalists have an easy answer. There are, as noted, both

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<sup>8</sup> Thank you to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on this point. The referee also helpfully points out that if the conclusion were 'Jenny and Charles both like Depp' it looks even harder to follow Sinhababu.

propositional and non-propositional instances of liking. If a situation draws our attention to propositional instances and the situation further supports the view that two subjects have likings with different propositional contents, then we may be tempted to say that our two subjects do not like the same thing. So, there is a perfectly good sense in which our subjects *do not* like the same thing but also a sense in which they *do*.<sup>9</sup> All of this is easily made sense of if there are both propositional and non-propositional attitudes, so as expansionists, anti-propositionalists face no deep problem here and indeed have an advantage since they can make good on the very tempting claim that of course the inference is valid.

To get its bite back, the inferential worry seems to require that there is no good inference in the offing. One could so argue by holding that sentences A and B, despite appearances, are not the simple relational ascriptions they appear to be. This would show that what *looks to be* an obviously good inference isn't. This is indeed Sinhababu's position. He believes that any time we ascribe what look to be non-propositional attitudes, we must be speaking elliptically:

It's best to understand objectual desire attributions as a shorthand for propositional desire attributions. We use them for economy of expression when our audience has enough background knowledge to know which propositional content we mean. When our audience wouldn't fill out the rest of the attitude ascription correctly, we use propositional desire attributions. As Lewis suggests, 'the objects of our attitudes are uniform in category, and it is our ways of speaking elliptically about these uniform objects that are diverse' (514).<sup>10</sup> While it'd be nice to have a formula for translating any objectual attitude attribution into propositional form, I can't offer one here. Knowing whether someone who desires Johnny Depp desires that they eat him, make love to him, hire him, or keep him in an aquarium requires background information about the desirer. The best I can say is that desiring x is desiring that some x-involving state of affairs obtain (9).

I might say 'Charles wants Depp' when I know full well that what he wants is to eat Depp or I might say 'Jenny likes Charles' when I know full well that Jenny likes to talk to Charles. If Sinhababu is correct, an inference like that given in A-C is only a good instance of existential

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<sup>9</sup> As King (2002) argues, there is in fact linguistic evidence to support that claim that there are two senses of verbs such as 'to like'.

<sup>10</sup> Sinhababu here cites Lewis (1979).

generalization when the elided material is the same. When we speak elliptically, very often it will not be and, in exactly those situations, anti-propositionalists will make faulty predictions of validity. It is crucial, then, that Sinhababu support the claim that sentences such as A-C don't wear their logical form on their sleeves. Let us note this debt and return to it in section 3.4. As we will see, this very same debt arises yet again in the next section.

### ***3.3 The Worry About Behavior and Action***

As we saw above, anti-propositionalists have at their disposal both non-propositional and propositional attitudes. Anything propositionalists can explain about action and behavior, anti-propositionalists can explain too. But might non-propositional attitudes be idle posits? I'll offer some cases where apparently non-propositional attitudes feature in explanations of behavior and action and so seem to do some important work, just as important as any propositional attitudes. This places a burden on the propositionalist to make sense of such non-propositional explanations in propositional attitude terms. As we will see, this gives way to an owed debt, the very same debt facing Sinhababu in the previous section.

Non-propositional attitudes regularly feature in psychological explanations. At the outset of the paper I gave a series of explanations that featured apparent ascriptions of non-propositional attitudes. Repeated here: the reason that I'm not going to the party tonight is that I believe only gin will be served and I hate gin. Lex Luthor avoids the Fortress of Solitude because he suspects Superman is there and he fears Superman. Bill wants to go to the bar because he heard John will be there and Bill loves John. John wants to go to the bar too, but it's because he heard that Bill will be there and he hates Bill – he needs to have a word with him. Here are a few more simple examples. The reason I want to be far away from Jones is that I fear him. Sam wants to be far away from Jones as well, but it is because he dislikes Jones. We both want the same thing – to be away from Jones – but the reason I want what I want is different

from Sam's reason. In fact, we often cite non-propositional attitudes when we want to explain certain desires. I want my brother to be happy because I love him, I want the pain in my leg to cease because I don't like the feeling of pain, and, as noted, I want to be far away from Jones because I fear him. Notice that the reasons given for these desires come in the form of ascriptions of further mental states, mental states ascribed in such a way that they aren't obviously propositional attitudes. Importantly, these are pretty typical psychological explanations that, like any other psychological explanations, allow us to explain and predict what agents are up to and why.

Returning to Sinhababu, the most charitable reading of his criticisms has it that anti-propositionalists face the challenge of saying what good non-propositional attitudes are. The answer is plain. Along with propositional attitudes, they feature in predictive psychological explanations.

Now, of course, a propositionalist should push back at this juncture by arguing that appearances are deceiving – what look to be non-propositional explanations are really propositional explanations in disguise. And as we saw above, this is precisely Sinhababu's position. The explanations just offered, according to Sinhababu, are elliptical. In a moment I'll offer reasons for thinking that propositionalists will run into systematic trouble here, but before doing so, it is worth asking exactly what the motivation for this move is supposed to be.

When I say that I want my brother to be happy *because I love him*, must I have spoken elliptically? Must there be something I love *about him* such that, on this basis, I want him to be happy? I needn't love that he is/be happy in order to love him. To love him I needn't love that he is kind or funny or witty or ... . Nevertheless, I can still love him and on that basis want him to be happy. The explanation of why I want my brother to be happy isn't obviously lacking. Why, then, must we look around for a propositional completion? The fact that Sinhababu has given us some

cases where we *can* and perhaps *should* find a propositional content hardly shows that in all cases we *must*.

But I'm willing to give this point away – let's suppose there is some *prima facie* motivation that would extend to all psychological explanations. Propositionalists must still show us that there is some way of, as Sinhababu says, 'translating any objectual attitude attribution into propositional form' (9). Sinhababu notes that he doesn't have a formula for doing so, but he clearly thinks that if we proceed case by case we should (at least in principle) succeed. This is an absolutely key move for propositionalists since it is clear that we ascribe what look to be hard working, non-propositional attitudes when offering perfectly acceptable psychological explanations. In the existing literature, it has been argued that propositionalists face some very hard cases,<sup>11</sup> but I want to do better than pass the burden back to them, ever waiting for a clever propositionalist translation. I will show that there are cases in which *any* propositional translation of a non-propositional ascription faces systematic problems.

### **3.4 Predicting Too Much**

The propositionalist view predicts too much by making possible readings of attitude ascriptions available that shouldn't be. This shows that the proposed propositional attitude sentences cannot be equivalent to the non-propositional attitude target sentences.

Quine (1956) drew attention to a distinction between specific and non-specific readings of sentences such as 'Sally wants a sloop' and 'Jones seeks a car'.<sup>12</sup> On specific readings, there is a specific sloop Sally wants (the HMS Resolution, say) and a particular car Jones seeks (Sally's Econoline, perhaps). On non-specific readings, there isn't a specific car or particular sloop at issue. As Quine helpfully puts it, Sally simply wants 'to be relieved of slooplessness'.

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<sup>11</sup> See especially Ben-Yami (1997), Grzankowski (2012), Merricks (2009), and Montague (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Quine uses the terms 'relational' and 'notional', though much of the literature has adopted the terminology of the main text, which I think is clearer. See Bonomi (1995) for reasons for thinking this distinction isn't simply the 'de re'/'de dicto' distinction. Bonomi's discussion furthers the thought that 'relational'/'notional' isn't the best way to label the distinction.

Interestingly, not all attitude verbs admit of this distinction – a point supported in the literature on intensional transitive verbs.<sup>13</sup> For example, the following are said to have only specific readings:

1. Bill fears a man.
2. Jones loves a woman.
3. Sally is thinking of a number.

Whereas one can want a sloop but no sloop in particular,<sup>14</sup> it is odd if not nonsense to say that one can fear, say, a man but no man in particular or that one can think of a number but no specific number. I might want a horse without wanting any particular horse, but it seems that if I hate a horse, there must be a particular one I hate. Matters seem no different if we change the quantifier. ‘Sally is thinking of three numbers’ seems to have only the specific reading and the same goes for ‘John likes exactly two cities’.

To avoid confusion, it is worth noting that such sentences do have a generic or habitual reading. ‘Bill likes a good cheese’ seems to have a reading that is roughly equivalent to something like, ‘In general, if one were to present Bill with some good cheese, he would like it’. But this is not quite the same phenomenon we saw with, for example, wanting a sloop – the generic and the non-specific are not one and the same. Here is a way to see that there is a difference. Take, ‘Jones loves a good bottle of wine’. There needn’t be some specific bottle that we are talking about, but this seems to be due to the fact that we are quantifying in some generic way over temporal episodes that might involve distinct bottles. (Such a reading is especially

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<sup>13</sup> See especially Hallman (2004). See Forbes (2006) and Larson et. al. (1997) for further discussion.

<sup>14</sup> Recall from above that I noted there are linguistic reasons favoring propositionalism about wanting/desiring. Here is one such reason: ‘Sally will want a car tomorrow’ is ambiguous between a description of a case in which Sally has a desire for a car tomorrow (though neutral on when the desire arises), and a case in which, sometime tomorrow, the desire for a car first arises. One obvious way to make sense of this ambiguity is to posit hidden structure involving ‘to have’: ‘Sally will want [to have] a car tomorrow’. With this additional structure, we can now capture the ambiguity in terms of verb modification. On one reading ‘tomorrow’ modifies ‘to have’ and on the other, ‘to want’. Larson et. al. (1997) and Searle (1983) have used facts like these to argue that even when they appear otherwise, wants/desires-ascriptions are ascriptions of propositional attitudes. Such motivations do not extend to liking, loving, fearing, and hating.

salient in ‘Jones loves a good bottle of wine on Wednesday nights’.<sup>15</sup> But if we focus attention on a particular, one-off mental episode of Jones’s, ‘Jones loves a bottle of wine’ is true just in case there is a particular bottle he loves. This is evidenced by the fact that we can reasonably ask ‘which one?’. Not so for the non-specific reading of ‘Sally wants a sloop’. We can focus attention on a particular mental episode at a particular, one-off time and still generate a non-specific reading. This is highlighted by noticing that asking ‘which one?’ would be misguided when Sally simply wants to be relieved of, say, slooplessness. Unfortunately for the propositionalist, this prediction concerning a *lack* of non-specific readings for mental verbs such as ‘to love’, ‘to like’, ‘to fear’, and so on is missed, for sentential complements seem to *always* allow for non-specific readings – non-specific readings are over-predicted.<sup>16</sup> For example, 4-6 all seem perfectly felicitous:

4. Jones fears that a disease will kill him, though there is no particular disease Jones has in mind.
5. Sam hates that exactly three horses (though none in particular) crossed the finish line.
6. Sally loves that a student brought her the apple, though there is no specific student such that she loves that he or she brought the apple.<sup>17</sup>

But now suppose that a theorist like Sinhababu is correct, that sentences such as ‘Jones fears a disease’ and ‘Sam hates exactly three horses’ have translations into propositional attitude sentences. My hypothesis is that for any sentential completion that the propositionalist offers, a non-specific reading that isn’t supposed to be available will become available. Only working through every case could confirm this claim, but a few more examples should make it

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<sup>15</sup> For more on generics see Leslie (2008) and Liebesman (2011).

<sup>16</sup> Further reason for propositionalism about desire. Desire ascriptions *do* allow for non-specific readings and propositional complements retain this.

<sup>17</sup> Imagine that Jones simply has a general fear of contracting a disease, Sam made a bet that she would only lose if any three horses finished, and Sally is just happy to be shown some appreciation by the students for a change.



exceedingly plausible, so let's add 7-11 to the data found in 4-6. All of the following seem to have a non-specific reading:

7. Smith fears that some papers have been lost.
8. Mary fears that a car in her lot was damaged by the hail.
9. Sally likes that at least five professors will be at the bar.
10. Bill loves that a limo is available for the prom.
11. Jones hates that a limo is available for the prom.

Again, appealing to context to select the 'correct' sentential completion seems to be of no help. It may be, for example, that in some cases the propositionalist believes that 'S likes a cat' is to be translated into 'S likes that a cat is friendly' but in other cases it should be translated into 'S likes that a cat is a good hunter'. But it's a general feature of clausal complements featuring indefinite noun-phrases and many other quantified noun-phrases that they make room for non-specific readings and so yield inequivalent attitude ascriptions.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. A Metaphysical Approach

One way that propositionalists might avoid the overprediction argument is to shift focus from a linguistic translation procedure to a metaphysical account. We have just seen that couching propositionalism in terms of sentences won't work, but perhaps the view would fare better if put in terms of mental facts and a thesis of reduction or dependence. More generally, propositionalists might wish to argue that all non-propositional facts obtain *in virtue of* propositional attitude facts. In this final section, I want to say a bit about why this suggestion might be thought to fare better, how the above discussion pressures and constrains this strategy,

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<sup>18</sup> And notice that belief and desire attributions featuring indefinite noun-phrases open non-specific readings too, so trying to capture, say fearing or liking attributions in terms of, say, belief and/or desire attributions, isn't going to help.

and why the strategy would be especially unhelpful for at least one of Sinhababu's worries in particular. Finally, I'll gesture towards a novel, systematic worry for this metaphysical approach.

To start, how might the metaphysical approach avoid the overprediction worry from section 3.4? The data from that section suggests that there are only specific instances of non-propositional attitudes but there are both specific and non-specific instances of propositional attitudes. Although non-propositional attitude *sentences* can't be treated in terms of propositional attitude *sentences*, a propositionalist might still maintain that non-propositional attitude facts obtain in virtue of *specific* propositional attitude facts. Not only would this move sidestep the worry raised in the last section, but it suggests a general strategy for propositionals that looks more flexible and hence more promising than Sinhababu's sentential approach.

Despite this possible improvement, metaphysical versions of propositionalism have been addressed in detail by Ben-Yami (1997), Grzankowski (2012), and Montague (2007). It has been argued that capturing non-propositional attitude facts in propositional attitude terms is at the very least very difficult, a point on which, as noted at the outside, I agree with. But the above discussion helps strengthen the anti-propositionalist case in two important ways:

First, the treatments of non-propositional attitude facts that propositionals offer must respect the specificity of the non-propositional attitudes discussed in the last section. The anti-propositionalist strategy has been to offer, on behalf of propositionals, ways propositionals might account for non-propositional facts. Those ways have been found wanting but the resources given to propositionals should be even more constrained than they have been – specificity must also be accounted for.

Second, it is striking that propositionalism is not often argued for and so it is noteworthy that Sinhababu aims to offer positive reasons for adopting the position in the face of pressure from anti-propositionalists. If his arguments were persuasive, propositionals should be motivated to meet the challenges posed by Ben-Yami, Grzankowski, and Montague. But we saw

above that once it is appreciated that anti-propositionalists are ontologically expansive rather than retractive, it is hard to see what anti-propositionalists can't accomplish. Moreover, with the exception of a preference for parsimony,<sup>19</sup> it's hard to see how to motivate propositionalism in any form. So another way the above discussion interfaces with the metaphysical approach to propositionalism is by pressuring the motivations for the view in the first place.

It is also worth pointing out that the metaphysical approach to propositionalism would undermine Sinhababu's argument about inferential patterns. Sinhababu's argument has it that C should not follow from A and B:

- A. Jenny likes Depp.
- B. Charles likes Depp.
- C. So, Jenny and Charles like the same thing.

As we saw above, if he were correct that these sentences actually had hidden syntactic material or expressed propositions that are more complex than their surface form lets on, this might be a sustainable position – what look to be simple, two place relations would be structurally more complicated. But on the metaphysical account under question, there *are* non-propositional facts, the fact that Jenny likes Depp and the fact that Charles likes Depp. But from those two facts (even if they depend on other facts) it simply *does* follow that Jenny and Charles like the same thing.<sup>21</sup> I don't think this is a serious concern for the metaphysical approach to propositionalism in general, but it is worth noting that if it is pursued, one of Sinhababu's tactics can't get off the ground.

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<sup>19</sup> And it is worth saying a bit more about parsimony. Parsimony may indeed be a virtue, but appealing to parsimony gets a grip only when we have competing theories that purport to explain or capture certain data. We saw above that there are psychological explanations that make appeal to non-propositional attitudes. Unless propositionalists wish to deny that data outright, they must offer some treatment of the non-propositional attitude facts in terms of propositional attitude facts. Sinhababu's approach won't work and the upshot of the work of Ben-Yami, Grzankowski, and Montague is that the forthcoming strategies aren't looking promising. In the present dialectic, a *desire* for parsimony at best serves as motivation to meet the challenges posed, but theory weighing isn't yet on the table.

<sup>21</sup> Again, thank you to an anonymous referee for highlighting this point. See footnote 8 above as well.

Finally, I want to gesture at another way of pressuring propositionalists systematically. We saw above that, contra Sinhababu, non-propositional attitudes feature in our folk-psychological explanations. I might explain why I want to see Bill by citing that I love Bill, for example. Propositionalists face an unappreciated challenge here.

To illustrate, focus on fearing things. Let's consider a couple attractive propositionalist attempts to capture non-propositional fearing: one fears a thing in virtue of believing that it is dangerous; one fears a thing in virtue of fearing that the thing will harm one. Of course a propositionalist might have other candidates in mind and can be flexible from context to context. Nevertheless, looking at these two suggestions will help to illustrate an anti-propositionalist strategy.

Imagine that you are deathly afraid of snakes. The very idea of being around them makes you cringe. Further, imagine that a friend is constantly getting wound up around plainly harmless dogs and reports that he fears that they will harm him any time he goes out. You ask him, 'Why are you always afraid that these dogs will harm you? They are on leashes, they are small, they are sometimes even toothless.' He responds, 'I have a fear of dogs. I fear dogs the way you fear you snakes. I just can't help myself. Because I am a dog fearer, I find myself fearing that any given dog in my presence will harm me.' This looks to be a helpful explanation of why your friend behaves as he does and indeed explains *why he has the propositional fears that he has*. Moreover, it seems quite plausible that the explanation is a causal one – your friend is caused to be in a propositional state by what appears to be a non-propositional state. But now suppose, as a propositionalist might suggest, that the fact that he fears dogs obtains *in virtue of* it being the case that he has a fear that dogs will harm him. Our attractive explanation of his behavior should now look far less attractive. If *what it is* to fear dogs is to be in the very propositional state we aim to explain, we offer no explanation at all. On the other hand, if the position is weaker than a 'what it is to be' claim, it still looks like the style of explanation will be constitutive or logical and not causal.

How might a propositionalist respond? There are two forthcoming ways. First, as noted, propositionalists could maintain that there is some *other* propositional attitude – some other fearing-that or some belief or some desire – upon which the non-propositional attitude depends. But it looks like we have the makings of a recipe for handling such cases: fix the propositional facts upon which non-propositional facts are said to depend and then look for situations in which, intuitively, reports of non-propositional liking, fearing, hating, or so on are explanatory but which would (if propositionalists were correct) be a mere reiteration of the fact we are aiming to explain. It's worth trying another example to show how this goes.

Suppose that propositionalists hold that fearing something holds in virtue of believing that it is dangerous. What causes me to believe that snakes are dangerous? It's easy to create a case where 'Because I fear snakes' seems to be an acceptable and indeed an informative answer. If my fearing snakes obtains in virtue of my believing that snakes are dangerous, it's hard to see how this could be so.

The only way that I can see for propositionalists to avoid this result is to say that context systematically gives way to a distinct propositional attitude fact that *is* explanatory. This strikes me as *ad hoc* if not desperate.

A second way to reply is to deny that the relevant relationship between, say, fearing dogs and fearing that dogs will harm one in the case envisioned above is causal. A propositionalist might maintain that we sometimes explain more fundamental facts by citing less fundamental facts and this is exactly the kind of explanation your friend is offering you in the dog-scenario.

This strikes me as a more plausible reply than the first one, but again it seems strained. In light of the recipe above, the propositionalist move will be to look for a non-causal explanation to satisfy our intuition that an explanation has indeed been offered. But everyone in the debate should agree that mental states can cause other mental states. It is very hard for me to see why (other than a precommitment to the propositionalist theory) we should think that, in any case that follows the recipe, we will have a non-causal explanation on our hands. The

contrary seems both possible and indeed likely. My fear of heights causes me to fear that I'll fall from the latter, Mary's love for her spouse causes her to want well for her spouse, and so on.

I don't offer the above as a knock-down argument against the metaphysical approach, but at the very least it furthers the burden. Propositionalists not only need to give some account of the non-propositional attitude facts, facts such as Bill's fearing snakes, in propositional attitude terms, but they must also recover what look to be causal explanations of behavior and action. There is a real worry that they cannot do so when what is being explained is the very kind of propositional attitude that propositionalists typically take to be good candidates for filling out their position.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the present paper I've aimed to clarify and strengthen the anti-propositionalist position. I've argued that when the thesis is properly understood, anti-propositionalists can and should hold that propositional attitudes play important roles in our psychological explanations but that non-propositional attitudes have a place as well. The motivations for ridding ourselves of non-propositional attitudes are lacking and attempts to explain them away run into serious difficulties. We should countenance non-propositional attitudes along side propositional attitudes and continue moving forward with positive accounts and applications.

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