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On Product-based Accounts of Propositional Attitudes

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Propositional attitude sentences, such as

John believes that snow is white,

are traditionally taken to express the holding of a relation between a subject and what 'that'-clauses like 'that snow is white' denote, i.e. propositions. On the traditional account, propositions are abstract, mind- and language-independent entities. Recently, some have raised some serious worries for the traditional account and thought that we were mistaken about the kind of entities propositions are. Over the last ten years there has then been a boom of accounts of propositions in terms of (types of) mental acts (Burge 2007; Hanks 2011; Soames 2010). But Friederike Moltmann (2013; 2014) has recently suggested that in accounting for attitudes we should forget about mind- and language-independent entities and (types of) acts and follow Twardowski (1912) in focusing instead on attitudinal objects, which are the products of our mental life. In this paper, I will focus on some semantic problems that any product-based account seems to face. Moreover, I will show that product-based accounts may be also criticised on ontological grounds. My conclusion will be that we lack a reason to think that in accounting for propositional attitudes we should focus on the alleged products of our mental lives.

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are traditionally taken to express the holding of an attitudinal relation between a subject and what 'that'-clauses like 'that snow is white' denote, i.e. *propositions*. On the traditional account, propositions are abstract, mind- and language-independent entities that have truth-conditions. Recently, some have raised some serious worries for the traditional account and thought that we were mistaken about the kind of entities propositions are. Over the last ten years there has then been a boom of accounts of propositions in terms of *mental acts*: according to these approaches, what John believes is not a mind- and

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language-independent entity, but a (type of) act of cognitive predication (Burge 2007; Hanks 2011; Soames 2010). But Friederike Moltmann (2013; 2014) has recently suggested that in accounting for attitudes we should forget about mind- and language-independent entities and (types of) acts and follow Kazimierz Twardowski (1912)[1] in focusing instead on attitudinal objects, which are the *products* of our mental lives.

What are these products? They are concrete and ephemeral objects, which exist only as long as there is the corresponding mental event. They cannot be shared—John produces his thought, Sue hers—and they depend for their identity on the kind of act they are the products of, so that products of thinking could not have been products of wishing. A comparison with artistic production may be helpful: just as the painting *Nuda Veritas* is the product of the artistic production of Gustav Klimt, which is distinct from the action itself of creating it, and moreover distinct from somebody else's artistic production, so we have the product of John's thinking that snow is white as distinct from John's act of thinking so and as distinct from the product of Sue's thinking so. But the comparison has some limits. Unlike paintings, in order to play the role traditionally played by propositions, the products of our mental lives should clearly have truth-conditions or more generally satisfaction-conditions.

In this paper, I will focus on some semantic problems that any product-based account seems to face. Moreover, I will show that product-based accounts may be also criticized on ontological grounds. My conclusion will be that we lack a reason to think that in accounting for propositional attitudes we should focus on the alleged ephemeral products of our mental lives.

1 Semantic issues

In English, we use various different constructions to speak about attitudes: we denote attitudes via something like

John's belief;

we quantify over attitudes as in

John believes everything Sue believes,

and in order to assert that a subject has a certain attitude we use propositional attitude sentences, such as

John believes that snow is white.

As we will see, all these constructions rebel against products. Let us see each in turn.

1.1 John's belief

If we account for our talk of attitudes in terms of products, then phrases like 'John's belief' are to be best taken as the devices we have in English to denote such products. The phrase 'John's belief' should be distinguished from 'John's believ*ing*': the second is used to speak about the act, not its product (Moltmann 2014, p. 8). That there is such a distinction

seems actually to be a good point in favour of distinguishing products from actions: just as sing*ing* produces a song and sculptur*ing* produces a sculpture, so fear*ing* produces a fear and think*ing* produces a thought. But while the distinction is a robust and intuitive one, it is less intuitive that products are really what we are trying to talk about when we use something like 'John's belief'. For John's belief seems to have none of the characteristics products are supposed to have, i.e. being non-shareable, individuated in terms of acts, and concrete.

Let us start from shareability. In English we say things like

John's thought is the same as Sue's

and we take sentences of this kind to be capable of being true. But if thoughts, as products of acts of thinking, are not shareable, how can it be that John's thought is the same as Sue's? Following Moltmann (2013, pp. 52–56; 2014, p. 13), one may try to explain the datum away by holding that 'the same as' does not express numerical identity, but qualitative identity, so that what the sentence says is that the product of John's thinking, something that he cannot share with Sue or anybody else, is *the same in kind* as the product of Sue's act.

Surely, this explanation is controversial, since it seems that when we utter something like

An object is always *the same as* itself

we may well be asserting the numerical identity of an object with itself. But we can let the example and Moltmann's explanation go. For we do not need to rely on 'the same as': in English we usually say also things like

Your thought is my thought
John's suggestion was my suggestion

and we can even say

John's suggestion was my very own suggestion,

where 'very own' seems, as usual, to put us down to the earth of numerical identity. Just to give a not down to earth example, in the Bible, things like

He who descended is the very one who ascended (Ephesians 4:10)

are in fact used by the translators exactly to make it clear that it is numerical identity that is puzzling and crucially asserted. Thus, *prima facie*, we can genuinely assert numerical identity between thoughts, suggestions, desires … of different subjects. But products, as we saw, are not shareable. Thus from the point of view of product-based accounts, all sentences in which identity is asserted should be taken to express, if

true, identity *in kind*. But there seem to be no reasons to accept this from outside a product-based account.

Now on to the ontological dependence of products on acts. If 'John's belief' denotes a product, the object denoted depends for its identity on the kind of act that produced it, exactly as products of sculpturing could not be products of painting. In fact, Moltmann (2014, p. 13) argues that we have some linguistic data supporting this ontological dependence: of the following sentences,

John's thought that snow is white is John's desire that snow is white
John's thought that snow is white is John's thought that snow is white,

the first is generally not judged true, but the second is trivially true, so that it seems that John's thought's identity conditions concern the fact that it is a thought, and not a desire.

But it should be noted that these data *pro* are counterbalanced by similar data *contra*, so that they do not seem reliable guide to the correct semantics for talk about attitudes. The following are, in fact, perfectly apt for truth:

Your response is my concern
Your thought is my prayer
Sue's suggestion was in fact John's claim.

It is true that if a 'that'-clause is added, the sentences obtained, such as, for example,

Your response that snow is white is my concern that snow is white,

are slightly odd, but this may well be due, for all we know, to the insertion of 'that'-clauses and not to the fact that responses cannot be concerns.

Finally, let us consider abstractness. Propositions are generally considered abstract entities. That is the reason why they raise some worries: How can we be in any relation whatsoever with them? Do they *really* exist? Products instead are concrete, so that all these problems dissolve: we can see Klimt's painting and, no matter how difficult it is to specify the identity criteria for works of art, the works of art seem indeed to exist. But even if it is welcome from an ontological point of view, the concreteness of products seems actually problematic from a linguistic point of view. For let us go back to Klimt's painting. The following sentence,

Nuda Veritas is in Vienna,

is true: Klimt produced a product, which is in space and time and now is in Vienna. Now suppose that John was in Vienna yesterday when he thought that snow is white. Why is there no way to make sense of the following sentence

John's thought was in Vienna

?

Perhaps we are obliterating some important distinctions here. After all, there are products and products. Probably, the products of our mental lives should be assimilated not primarily to paintings, but to dances, poems and musical compositions, which do not produce material objects. The following sentence is in fact similarly unacceptable:

The product of John's dancing was in Vienna.

But for those of us who are happy with as desert a landscape as can be, why should these data not be taken to show that there is actually nothing like the concrete product of John's dancing, but simply an event of dancing that did not produce anything? If John's thought were concrete, then it would be better for sentences ascribing to it properties typical of concrete objects to make sense. They do not: John's thought does not seem to be or to have been in space and time.

Phrases like 'John's belief', thus, rebel against products, and those data that seem to be good points in favour of products are systematically counterbalanced by data against them. Let us then move to another construction.

1.2 John believes what Sue believes

There are products of Klimt's artistic genius and from something like

Klimt painted *Nuda Veritas*

we can deduce

Klimt painted something.

Similarly, from a sentence like

John expects that Fregeans will disagree with Moltmann

we can deduce

John expects something.

On a product-based account, this is tantamount to

There is a product of John's act of expectation.

But then what John expects is a product and it is either a kind of thing that does not happen, as products like paintings and sculptures do not happen, or a thing that has happened or is happening now during John's act of expectation, as it seems to be the case with dances and performances. Surely, it is false that *it is going to happen*. Thus on a product-based account

John expects something that is going to happen

is false. But, presumably, Fregeans will disagree with Moltmann and what John expects is then going to happen, so that the sentence is presumably true, not false.

Following Jeffrey King (2007), many have argued that some propositional attitude predicates, such as precisely 'to expect', are ambiguous and have different meanings when followed by a 'that'-clause or a name or a description. After all, it seems intuitive that expecting that Fregeans will disagree with Moltmann is not the same as expecting a proposition. Can a defender of a product-based account rely on this ambiguity here? It seems that she cannot. Holding that ambiguity plays a role in our example is tantamount to holding that when we move from

John expects that Fregeans will disagree with Moltmann

to

John expects something

the predicate actually changes meaning, so that the deduction is incorrect. This seems highly counterintuitive. King himself (2007, p. 162), in fact, precisely to save the correctness of the deduction, holds that quantifiers have an exceptional behaviour, in being the only syntactic units that can be substituted for a 'that'-clause without the predicate changing meaning.[2]

A defender of products may then try a different strategy and rely on *kinds* of products. She may try to hold that for two products to be of the same kind, they should have the same content. Since when John expects that Fregeans will disagree with Moltmann it is something connected with the content of his expectation that is going to happen, relying on kinds seems promising. So let us first see another example which should be accounted for by relying on the notion of *kind of product*. We will then see whether kinds might make things work.

A cross-quantificational sentence like

John believes what Sue believes

is tantamount to

John believes *that which* Sue believes.

The sentence may well be true. Since products are not shareable, the 'that' cannot stand for a product, because there is nothing which can be both the product of John's believing and of Sue's believing. So within a product-based account, we should hold that the sentence is short for

John and Sue believe two things of the same kind.

Thus, in order to account for this sentence, as well as for

John expects something that is going to happen,

we should in some way or other rely on *kinds* of products and should also probably be ready to quantify over them.

Now, when do two products belong to the same kind? It is clear that they should have the same *content*. We do not care where the belief was formed, with what intensity, on what basis: John believes what Sue believes if, given that John believes that snow is white, Sue too believes that snow is white. So in order to account for our sentences from within a product-based account we need somehow to introduce the notion of *content*. This does not necessarily mean that we are positing contents as entities separate from products, and in fact Moltmann holds that a shared content is to be considered as "a common feature of attitudinal objects" (2014, p. 19, footnote 5), i.e. as a property, not as an object.[3] But, still, contents play a role in the theory. Now contents are what we usually call 'propositions'. This is not in itself a criticism: an account in terms of products is not necessarily an account that does not employ the notion of *content*. But still, firstly, some classic issues for propositions then need to be faced also by the defender of the product-based account: When do two products share a content?

Secondly, on product-based accounts the analysis of cross-quantificational sentences is clearly more complicated than on the traditional picture. For seeing cross-quantificational sentences as speaking about two objects sharing a content is a by-product of the product-based accounts. On the propositional account what John believes is not what Sue believes because there are two different products and those products have the same content, or, as is usually said, because they *match in content* (Higginbotham 2006) or are *samesaying* (Davidson 1968). On the traditional view, what John believes is what Sue believes because there is just a thing, i.e. a content, a proposition, that John and Sue both believe. Thus product-based accounts are more complex both at the level of notions involved—*products* and *contents* instead of just *contents* - and at the level of the semantic account of the cross-quantificational sentences.

We need a reason to accept this resulting complexity. We therefore need to look at our last kind of construction, i.e. propositional attitude sentences, such as

John believes that snow is white.

For phrases like

John's belief

rebel against products, and thus *only if* a product-based account gave us a very appealing account of propositional attitude sentences, an account that is specifically product-oriented, would we end up with a good reason for accepting a multiplication of notions. Unfortunately, as we will immediately see, this is not the case.

1.3 John believes that snow is white

In accounting for propositional attitude attributions in terms of products, we cannot take products to be what 'that'-clauses denote: if 'that'-clauses denoted products, then the second of the following sentences,

> John fears that snow is white
> John fears the product of John's fearing that snow is white,

is obtained from the first by substitution of a term by a co-denotational one, and thus the two sentences would have to have the same truth-conditions. But this is clearly not the case: the second sentence does not mean that John fears that snow is white, but means, if anything at all, that John fears his own fear. As Moltmann (2003, pp. 86–89; 2013, pp. 121–122) aptly calls it, we have an *objectivization effect*: while the 'that'-clause provides us with the content of John's fear, the definite description seems to provide us with the object John's fear is directed towards.

Should we care about these cases of non-substitutivity? It really seems we should. First of all, the effect is very general, since it is cross-linguistically well supported and concerns many different predicates. Secondly, if, on the basis of linguistic data, we are trying to provide a semantic theory for English propositional attitude sentences, then, as Richard Cartwright (1962, p. 102) would remark, we cannot simply dismiss those data that do not fit in our theory:

> "They will claim that this is, somehow, only a point of usage—a linguistic accident … One wonders, in the first place, how it could be a mere fact of usage … Usage of what? … And one wonders, in the second place, how to tell those points of usage which are *merely* that from those which are something more".[4]

In fact, Moltmann cares about these cases of non-substitutivity and does not hold that 'that'-clauses denote products. Although she does not provide us with a fully developed account, she (2014, pp. 17–18) suggests embracing a Davidsonian event semantics according to which *the logical form* of

> John fears that snow is white

is

> $\exists e(fear(e,John)$ & [that snow is white](product(e))).

According to this account, if the sentence is true, then there is or has been an event of fearing whose subject is John and whose product has the property expressed by the 'that'-clause 'that snow is white'. Thus, according to Moltmann's product-based account, the 'that'-clause provides us with a property[5] enjoyed by a product.

Moltmann introduces her account very quickly and she does not specify whether other semantic accounts would equally do. But it is actually this move of holding that

the 'that'-clause specifies a property instead of denoting an object that solves the problem created by the objectivization effect, and not the introduction of products. For in taking 'that'-clauses as non-denotational, the objectivization effect can be traced back to a much wider phenomenon: in general, non-denotational complements do not allow for substitution. To give one of the endless examples, the moves from

John is beautiful

to

John is the property of being beautiful
John is beauty

are clearly and notoriously not truth-preserving. A Fregean would say that the substitution violates the primitive logical difference between predicates, concepts, unsaturated entities on the one hand and names, objects, saturated entities on the other. Whether or not the Fregean explanation is a good one (or an explanation at all, and not just, as Davidson (1967, p. 304) holds, a label for a difficulty rather than a solution to it), it is clear that if 'that'-clauses are non-denotational the failure of their substitutivity is just an instance of a much wider phenomenon, which goes far beyond 'that'-clauses, propositional attitudes and their alleged products.

2 Ontological worries

Let us take stock. We saw that constructions like

John's belief

rebel against products and that in order to account for sentences like

John expects something that is going to happen
John believes what Sue believes

a product-based account should be enriched with notions like *kind of product* and *content*. We then concluded that *only if* a product-based account gives us a very appealing account of propositional attitude sentences, an account that can be endorsed *only* in terms of products, may we in the end have a reason to accept such a complex account.

But we did not end up with a specifically product-oriented account: the thesis that 'that'-clauses are non-denotational is obviously not tied to products, as shown by the fact that it can be combined with the thesis that beliefs do not concern products, but our old-fashioned propositions. For example, one can hold, as in accordance with Moltmann, that the 'that'-clause provides us with a property and maintain that different predicates of propositional attitude relate to objects of different kinds — 'to believe' to propositions, 'to fear' to eventualities, 'to know' to facts. Exactly as 'beautiful' expresses a property that can

be enjoyed by statues, human beings, ideas and flowers, so one can urge that 'that'-clauses express properties that can be enjoyed by propositions, facts or eventualities. In this way the objectivization effect would be perfectly explained without having to posit products.

A semantic scrutiny therefore speaks against products, not in their favour. Still, this does not show yet that products should be ruled out from our account of attitudes, since a defender of products may hold that there are other kinds of reasons, ontological in character, that might outweigh the negative result of a semantic scrutiny. The defender may protest that, differently from what happens with propositions and (types of) acts, products are ontologically unproblematic.

But this move is not going to rescue products, I think. While we were conducting our semantic scrutiny, we assumed that products are ontologically unproblematic, but it is now time to pause and try to understand whether there really are things like the ephemeral concrete products of our mental lives. For those of us who like desert landscapes, the answer is obviously 'no'. But this is not to the point. What matters is that the answer is similarly negative even from a neutral point of view. Even assuming that there are actions of saying, denying, and possibly recognizing that produce products, it is really difficult to see believing (and other attitudes, such as knowing and holding) as an action. What act are we supposed to perform? This is even more difficult insofar as implicit beliefs are considered: What act are we supposed to perform in now believing, as most of us presumably do, that 74^1 is 74?

Beliefs look like states, not like events: for example, while it makes sense to ask *when* somebody said this and that, when it comes to beliefs what we should instead ask is *for how long* someone believed what she did (Vendler 1972, pp. 14–15). Moltmann (2014, p. 19, footnote 4) herself quickly discusses the matter but simply holds that the category of actions, for Twardowski, includes states, such as belief states. Surely, states have always been an issue for Davidsonians, which has generally been solved by extending the event account to states and processes (Higginbotham 2000, pp. 84–88; Parsons 1989, p. 218). But if

John believes that snow is white

should be more plausibly taken as saying that there is a state and not an event, then the theses that the 'that'-clause characterizes products and that we should rely on products in accounting for beliefs become hardly tenable. In general, there can be a product only if there is an activity of which the product is the product. If there is any relation at all between states and products, it seems that states *are* products, not things that *have* products. Thus, there seems to be nothing like the relation between a state and its own product. Moltmann admits that the action-product distinction may not apply in the very same way to actions and states, but this is far too optimistic: the point is not that the state-product distinction is different from the action-product distinction, but that it simply does not make much sense to speak about the state-product distinction, given that there seems to be nothing like the product of a state and when we believe something, we produce nothing.

Thus ontological considerations do not rescue product-based accounts: if ontological considerations matter at all, they are further reasons to reject products, not to endorse them. Since the semantic scrutiny speaks against products too, it seems that we really lack a reason to hold that in accounting for propositional attitudes we should focus on the alleged ephemeral concrete products of our mental lives.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 Moltmann's and Twardowski's proposals are (at least) terminologically different. While according to her (2014, pp. 16, 19, footnote 5) propositional content is a feature of a product, according to him (1912, p. 24) propositions are what we actually produce when we judge. I will follow her terminology in order not to confuse propositions in Twardowski's sense and as traditionally understood.

2 It should be admitted that our example.
John expects something that is going to happen
is problematic also for traditional propositional accounts. For on the traditional account what John expects is a proposition, and since traditionally propositions are abstract entities that have truth-conditions, they are not things that *are going to happen*. The defender of a product-based account might then urge that while the example is problematic, it does not constitute a specific problem for product-based accounts. Thanks to an anonymous referee for stressing this point.

3 Again, thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

4 Schiffer (2003, pp. 93–96) takes the examples of non-substitutivity as simply showing a quirk of Indo-European languages. If it is correct that we should not care about these data, then product-based accounts are again linguistically on a par with the alternatives, given that whatever 'that'-clauses denote - products, propositions, acts, sentences or what have you – the cases of non-substitutivity do not create a genuine problem.

5 Moltmann intentionally does not develop this further, as she explicitly states: "I will leave it open in which way exactly a 'that'-clause compositionally specifies a property of products" (2014, p. 17).

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