

Lecture 2 - The propositional attitudes

Suggested reading

- Fodor (1987) *Psychosemantics*, Ch 1 (also see Ch 4 for his attempt to reduce intentionality to propositional content)
- Forbes (2006) *Attitude Problems*, Ch 3 & 4

Recall: the intentional object is what an intentional state is about; the intentional content is how the object is represented by the state.

1 What are propositional attitudes?

- A popular idea in the 20th century is that intentional content is *propositional* - that is, they can be true or false.

Belief is a certain attitude towards propositions, which is called knowledge when they are true, error when they are false. (Russell, 1904, 523)

- Intentional states are thereby treated as propositional attitudes - attitudes to propositions. E.g. S's belief that it will rain tomorrow is S's belief-attitude to the proposition 'it will rain tomorrow'.
- Fodor (in *Propositional Attitudes, Psychosemantics*) argued that beliefs and desires are propositional attitudes - they comprise relations to propositional content (rather than intentional objects). Intentional states are *semantically evaluable* - they are true/false (*Psychosemantics*, p.10-11).
- More specifically, Fodor thinks that a propositional attitude is a relation between the subject and a token mental representation. He takes mental representations to express propositions, and his main challenge is to explain how this is possible. (See *Psychosemantics* Ch.4 and the Appendix.) Fodor's account of intentionality is reductive - it attempts to analyse intentionality in non-intentional terms.

2 The problem of non-existence

Propositionalism is the view that *all* intentional states are propositional attitudes. (E.g. Davidson 1970, Hartry Field 1978, likely Fodor)

Recall the problem of non-existent objects, which consists of this inconsistent triad:

- (A) Intentional states are relations between thinkers and the things thought about.
- (B) Relations entail the existence of their relata.
- (C) Intentional states can be about things that do not exist.

- Propositionalism solves this by replacing (A) with: (A*) Intentional states are relations between thinkers and mental representations that express propositions.
- Intentional states can therefore be about things that do not exist, since they can have propositional contents that are about the non-existent. E.g. Le Verrier's belief that Vulcan is a planet is not a relation to the planet Vulcan, since it doesn't exist. But it is a relation to the proposition 'Vulcan is a planet'.
- This solution is tempting because while it denies (A), it replaces it with (A*), which preserves our intuition that intentional states are relations. (See Fodor, *PA*, p.502)

3 Non-propositional intentionality

- The problem with propositionalism is that many of our intentional states are not described in a propositional way. E.g. 'I want a slice of cake', 'He is afraid of dogs' - slices of cake and dogs are not things that are true or false.
- Desires can be construed as propositional attitudes. E.g. 'I want a slice of cake' is really an abbreviation: I desire the state of affairs *that I eat a slice of cake*. (See Crane *Objects of Thought*, Ch 4.5 for more on this reductive proposal of propositionalism.)
- But many other states of mind resist such 'reduction'. E.g. the 'object-directed' states such as seeing, loving, hating. These seem to be relations, because it seems right to say that you cannot love or see what does not exist. They also seem to be attitudes to *objects*, e.g. people, and no one has been able to plausibly explain how loving someone could just be the having of certain propositional attitudes.
- There are many other intentional states, which can be about real or non-existent objects, which also resist reduction to propositional attitudes. These are the states described by the 'intensional transitive verbs', which include: (See Graeme Forbes, *Attitude Problems* Ch.3 for many more)
 - Verbs of anticipation: expect, fear, foresee
 - Verbs of evaluation: admire, respect, worship
 - Verbs of requirement: look (for), seek

To summarise:

- The object-directed intentional states (love, hate, seeing) must be directed on real objects, so these don't face the problem of non-existence.
- For intentional states that can be about the non-existent:
 - Some can be construed as propositional attitudes (belief, desire)
 - Those described by intensional transitive verbs resist reduction to propositional attitudes (fear, admire, expect, etc.)

4 Propositions as models

Even for beliefs, which seem to straightforwardly fit the propositional attitude mould, problems arise when we scrutinise further.

- If each belief is a relation to a proposition, then we each must have a fixed number of beliefs. But what about delusional beliefs, or the beliefs of young children?
- There are many views on what propositions are (Russellian, Fregean, etc.) Which one should we accept?

An alternative is to treat propositions as just *models* of a subject's world-view.

- 'These entities are better conceived as constructs, postulated for various theoretical purposes in philosophy, linguistics and psychology.' (Rumfitt, *Truth and Meaning*)
- World-views can be indeterminate, incomplete, confused, even contradictory. Some aspects of one's world-view are easily modelled with propositions, others are not.

Li Li Tan
llt27@cam.ac.uk