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Tietz, Sarah

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Why propositions?

(Sarah Tietz, Zurich)

In „Truth Rehabilitated“ Davidson wrote that „Paul Horwich has revived what we may call propositional deflationism.“¹ Horwich thesis is that all that can be said about „truth“ is „what is expressed by uncontroversial instances of the equivalence schema,

(E) It is true that p if and only if p.“²

Accordingly truth is neither identical with the property of corresponding with reality, nor with coherence, nor with use. And what's more: the notion of truth is also independent of the notions of reference and satisfaction.

This is the deflationist part of propositional deflationism. The propositional part aims at showing that the basic bearers of the truth-predicate are `creatures of darkness` -- namely, propositions.

Why? Firstly, because ordinary language use suggests it. As Horwich notices: “the ordinary truth predicate is primarily applied to such things as `what John believes`, `what we are supposing for the sake of argument`, `what Mary was attempting to express`, and so on – that is, not to sentences, but to propositions.”³ Secondly, so-called propositional attitudes should be conceived as relations between a person and a proposition, because only then, or so Horwich claims, can we provide an adequate account of the logical properties of belief attributions and the like. Thus, if we treat the “that p” in a belief-attribution like “Oscar believes that p” as a singular term we can infer that there is something that Oscar believes. Or better, if we treat the “that p” in a belief-attribution *we accept as true* as a singular term then we can take this assumption to entail that there is something that is believed, namely a proposition. And if we accept propositions as the referents of “that p” we can also subsume inferences under familiar logical rules. Accordingly from

(1) Oscar believes that it will rain

and

(2) Betsy doubts that it will rain

¹ Davidson 1997 (2005), p. 9.

² Horwich 1998, p. 6

³ Horwich, „Varieties of Deflationism“, 2010, p. 32.

we can infer

(3) Oscar believes what Betsy doubts.⁴

The third reason Horwich gives for the thesis that propositions are the basic bearers of the truth-predicate is that Quine and his followers argue in a question begging way when they claim that only material objects exist and that therefore propositions with merely intensional criteria of identity cannot exist.

Now, in order to answer my title-question I shall not discuss these three reasons Horwich gives for the necessary assumption of propositions. What I shall do instead is discuss a famous Davidsonian objection against Horwich's truth theory as a whole. As shall be shown, there is an answer to this objection that is along the line Davidson himself once proposed. But in order for it to work we must make use of propositions.

Now, first the objection Davidson raised against Horwich. It might be put in the following question: How can we make use of the same semantic features of the sentence which occurs on both sides of the "iff" in giving the semantics of the equivalence schema (E)?

The problem Davidson sees is that the referents of a contained `that`-clause cannot be determinable by the referents of its parts because substitutions of co-referential terms within a `that`-clause will not always preserve the truth value of the containing sentence.

An obvious answer in the Fregean vein would be: Well, Davidson, you are right. In a `that`-clause like "John believes that Hesperus rotates" an expression indeed does not have its standard-referent. But still, the expression has a referent. It is its sense, or in Horwich terms, its meaning. Thus, "why not identify the referent of `that Hesperus rotates` with the meaning of `Hesperus rotates` and identify the referents (in that context) of the contained words `Hesperus` and `rotates` with *their* meanings?"⁵

Because, or so Davidson holds, the meanings of words in `that`-clauses just are their *normal* meanings. Or at least, the meanings of words in `that`-clauses *must be* their normal meanings. For, we can only understand a sentence like "The proposition that Hesperus rotates" if we understand the contained sentence "Hesperus rotates" in isolation. Therefore, both occurrences of "Hesperus rotates" in the bi-conditional must be understood in the same way. But then, how can it be that words in `that`-clauses don't have their standard-referents? "And if they do have their standards referents then `that`-

⁴ Horwich 1998, pp. 86-87.

⁵ Horwich, „A Defense of Minimalism“, pp. 53-54.

clauses cannot refer, since what would be determined by those standard referents would be the wrong thing (e.g. `that Hesperus rotates` would acquire the same referent as `that Phosphorus rotates`)."6

Overwhelming as the objection might seem, Horwich does not see his account of truth defeated. Along Fregean lines he proposes to "simply deny that meaning *all by itself* determines reference. We can allow – and this, of course, is completely uncontroversial – that the referent of a term is fixed in part by the *context* in which it occurs."⁷ What does he mean? As just seen, words can occur both in a standard way and in a non-standard way. According to Horwich a standard way would be one in which words occur transparently. In this case the referent of a word like "Hesperus" would be one, namely the planet. A non-standard way on the other hand, would be one in which the word occurs in an opaque way as is the case in `that`-clauses. Here too we have just one referent. But it differs from the referent in transparent contexts. In opaque contexts like in `that`-clauses the referent of the word "Hesperus" would be its sense, or meaning.

I am not sure whether this proposal still doesn't fall victim to Davidson's objection. For, even a relativization to different contexts doesn't rule out the fact that we understand "The proposition that Hesperus rotates" only when we understand the sentence "Hesperus rotates" in isolation. That is, what we understand first are the words in their transparent context. Now, since we are dealing with bi-conditionals the occurrences of "Hesperus rotates" have to be understood in the same way on both sides. Accordingly, we have the problem to explain how it can be possible that words in the `that`-clause could not be understood as if they were in a transparent context. But again, if we understood words in `that`-clauses as if they were in a transparent context then `that`-clauses cannot refer because the thusly determined referents would be wrong.

Does this mean Davidson finally won? Not yet. As said in the beginning, I think there might be one proposal along Davidsonian lines that could be an answer to his objection.

In "On saying that" Davidson suggests to analyze belief-attributions or other attributions of mental states not as one sentence containing another in a non-transparent position but as a sequence of sentences, that is, as a parataxis. Hence, the expression "Galileo said that the earth moves" does not contain of one sentence, containing another but of two sentences, namely of "Galileo said that" and of "The earth moves." What is of importance is that the "that" in the first sentence is a demonstrative, not a complementizer. It refers

⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

to an utterance the speaker is just about to produce, here to the utterance “The earth moves”. Accordingly, the first utterance expresses a truth of an utterer *u* at time *t* if and only if the utterance designated by the demonstrative as used by *u* at *t* has the same content as one of Galileo's beliefs. Frege's puzzle, or so it seems, is solved. Nothing inside the parataxis requires an intensional individuation.

Now I said in the beginning that there might be a solution to Horwich's problem along Davidsonian lines, and one that necessarily makes recourse to intensional entities like propositions. As should be clear, the solution cannot lie in Davidson's just mentioned original proposal, since it completely dispenses with intensional entities. But in the way just mentioned Davidson's proposal is not without problems, as especially Tyler Burge has shown. Consider the following argument:⁸

(A1) Many believe that the earth moves.

Therefore, many believe that the earth moves.

Since (A1) exemplifies the schema of arguments by repetition, ‘A.:A’, it is formally valid. So a fortiori it is valid, that is, when the conclusion is not true it is impossible for the premiss to be true.

But now, compare the paratactic counterpart of (A1),

(A2) Many believe that. The earth moves.

Therefore, many believe that. The earth moves.

If (A2) is understood in a Davidsonian fashion, then the objects designated by the two demonstratives are two different utterances “1” and “2”. Now, if the demonstratives designate 1 and 2 respectively, then the truth of the premiss depends on the existence of 1, while the truth of the conclusion depends on the existence of 2. But since there is no necessity as to the co-existence of 1 and 2, we can conceive of circumstances in which 1 exists without 2. The problem is that “under such circumstances the premiss would be true, while the conclusion would not be true. So (A2) is not valid, let alone formally valid.”⁹

I think Burge's and Künne's objection hits Davidson. But, or so I want to suggest, there is a solution that is still along Davidson's lines.¹⁰ It goes back to Wolfgang Künne. If we could analyse belief-attributions paratactically, nothing, Künne holds, should stand in the way to treat Horwich's equivalence schema (E) in the same way.

⁸ I am referring here to Künne's version of Burge's objection to Davidson.

⁹ Künne, 2009, p. 208.

¹⁰ This suggestions stems from Künne 2009, 329.

Thus, "The proposition that dogs bark is true if and only if dogs bark" would become
(E-Par) Dogs bark. That proposition is true if and only if dogs bark.

On the face of it this move as well seems to be open to Burge's objection. But this is not the case, as Künne remarks. The paratactic counterpart of the argument

(A1) The proposition that dogs bark is true. Therefore,
 The proposition that dogs bark is true.

(A2) Dogs bark. That proposition is true. Therefore,
 Dogs bark. That proposition is true

is formally valid because here the first occurrence of the demonstrative designates the same object as its second occurrence, namely the proposition that dogs bark.

Thus, if we want to have a version of deflationism that does not fall victim to Davidson's objection we should not only analyze the equivalence schema (E) paratactically but also with propositions as parts.