Predication and Rule-Following

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Introduction

One of the traditional roles for propositions is to serve as a source of representational properties and truth conditions. This is captured by the idea that propositions are the primary bearers of truth conditions. Anything else that has truth conditions, such as a sentence or an assertion or a belief, derives its truth conditions from a proposition. On this traditional account, propositions come first in the order of explanation for truth conditions, and mental and linguistic items come second. Switching images, it is standard to locate propositions in Frege’s abstract third realm, above the concrete realm of mental and linguistic states and events. This image endows the traditional view with a top-down explanatory structure, with propositions at the top and mental and linguistic items underneath.

In recent work on the nature of propositional content I have argued for a reversal of the traditional order of explanation (Hanks 2011, 2014, 2015a). On this alternative approach the primary bearers of representation and truth conditions are actions that we perform when we are thinking or speaking. Propositions derive their representational properties and truth conditions from these actions. Representation and truth conditions originate with us, through our thoughts and utterances. Propositions are abstractions from these actions, which we use to classify and individuate mental states and speech acts but which play no foundational, explanatory role.
The most straightforward way to implement this approach is with the type/token distinction. The primary bearers of truth conditions are token mental or spoken actions. Propositions are types of these actions, which inherit their truth conditions from their tokens. In previous writings I used the term ‘predication’ for these actions. Scott Soames, who independently arrived at a similar view, uses the same terminology.¹ Soames and I thus understand predication as a certain kind of mental or spoken action.

Soames takes predication to be primitive (Soames 2010, 29), but there’s no need to resort to that. The act of predication is best understood as a rule-governed act of sorting or classifying or categorizing. To predicate a property of an object is to sort that object with other similar objects. This act is rule-governed in the sense that it has a standard of correctness – it can be done correctly or incorrectly. Properties provide these standards of correctness. Suppose you have a pile of marbles in front of you, and you’ve decided to sort out all the blue marbles. Picking up a marble and putting it into the pile of blue marbles is analogous to predicating the property of being blue of that marble. In this case, the property of being blue provides the standard of correctness for your act of sorting. If the marble is blue then you correctly sorted the marble, and if not then not. Had you been sorting according to the property of being green then the standard of correctness would have been different. A crucial role for properties in acts of predication

¹ We use the same terminology, but there is a significant difference between the ways Soames and I understand predication. For Soames, acts of predication are neutral and non-committal, similar to the traditional notion of entertainment. On my view, acts of predication are not neutral. A normal, stand-alone act of predicating a property of an object commits the subject to the object’s having that property. In this sense, predication is closer to the traditional notions of judgment or assertion. This difference won’t matter for this paper, but see (Hanks 2015a, ch.1) for an argument that Soames’s way of understanding predication is incoherent.
is thus to fix the correctness conditions for those acts. It is precisely because acts of predication have these correctness conditions that they are capable of being true or false, and hence capable of grounding the truth conditions of propositions. On the act-based conception of propositions, understanding how properties endow acts of predication with correctness conditions is essential for understanding the nature of propositional representation.

In this paper I am going to try to deepen this understanding by raising two problems for this approach to propositions and predication. The first problem, which I will call the Stalnaker question, has an easy solution. But this solution raises the specter of a much more difficult problem, which goes to the heart of what is known as Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations. The rule-following considerations do not refute the act-based conception of propositions. They do not show that it is unworkable or incoherent. Rather, they undermine a picture of rule-following that provides a natural stopping point for the explanatory strategy of the act-based conception. The effect of this is to put pressure on the act-based conception to push its explanatory strategy further than it currently stands. I do not know how to extend the act-based account in the required way. The aim of this paper, then, is to pose a problem for the act-based conception that demands further work. If nothing else, I hope to clarify a connection between the debate about the nature of propositions and Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations.

The Stalnaker question
I call it the “Stalnaker” question because it was posed to me by Robert Stalnaker during the question-and-answer period after a talk I gave on propositions. More background is needed, however, before we can understand the point of his question.

As I argued in the talk, and as I have argued at length elsewhere (Hanks 2015a, ch.2), the main problem for the traditional account of propositions is a version of the problem of the unity of the proposition. The unity problem is in fact a family of related problems, which arise in different ways for different theories of propositions (King 2009). For our purposes, the relevant issue is about explaining or understanding how propositions have truth conditions. The traditional view offers, at least in outline, an explanation of how our beliefs and assertions have truth conditions — they get their truth conditions from propositions. But what can we say, if anything, about how propositions themselves get their truth conditions? Given the top-down explanatory structure of the traditional view, in trying to answer this question we are not allowed to appeal to any of our beliefs or intentions or assertions. More generally, we are not allowed to appeal to any representational mental states or utterances. Propositions must have their truth conditions on their own, without any contribution from us. In the face of this constraint it is natural to look to the internal make-up of a proposition, i.e. its constituents and the way those constituents are related to one another, in trying to explain how it has truth conditions. This is why it makes sense to call this a “unity” problem. Since we cannot appeal to what goes on in thought or speech, in explaining how a proposition is capable

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2 At the New Work on Speech Acts Conference, held at Columbia University in September 2013. Jeff King has told me that Stalnaker asked the same question of him on previous occasions.
of being true or false we have to look to the way in which its constituents are unified into a single, representational whole.

The history of attempts at solving this problem is not encouraging. Both Frege and Russell felt the need to say something about how propositions are unified, and both were dissatisfied with their solutions. Frege appealed to the relation of saturation through which an unsaturated predicate-sense comes to be joined with a complete, saturated name-sense. But as he himself admitted, these notions of being saturated and unsaturated are only metaphors, “only figures of speech” (Frege 1892, 193). It was even worse for Russell. The problems he encountered with the unity of the proposition led him to abandon propositions altogether and adopt in their place his multiple relation theory of judgment.³ In doing so he gave up the traditional account of propositions.

A thorough examination of Frege’s and Russell’s attempts at solving the unity problem, and more recent attempts, would take us beyond the scope of this paper.⁴ Let’s instead consider the initially appealing idea that there is in fact no need to solve this problem. Maybe the demand for an explanation can be rejected. Perhaps it is a groundfloor, primitive fact that propositions are bearers of truth conditions.⁵ It is easy to find oneself inclined to say: that is just what propositions are, by nature or definition, and so there is no need to try to explain why or how they have truth conditions. On this view, the fact that propositions are the primary bearers of truth conditions is a basic starting point in the philosophical account of mental and linguistic representation.

³ See (Hanks 2007) for the historical details.

⁴ See (Hanks 2015a, ch. 2) and (Hanks 2009).

⁵ See (Merricks 2015) for a recent example of this view.
But taking this line is going to force you into other commitments. First, it is going to be difficult to maintain both that it is primitive that propositions have truth conditions and that they are structured entities with constituents. For, presumably, if they had constituents and structure then we could explain their truth conditions in terms of this structure. But we are now supposing that no such explanation can be given. It looks gratuitous to attribute structure and constituents to propositions if their structures and constituents play no explanatory role. Furthermore, as Trenton Merricks has recently pointed out (Merricks 2015, 199-205), there would be an inexplicable correspondence between the truth conditions of a proposition and its constituents. The proposition that $a$ is F is true if and only if $a$ is F, where this is a primitive, unexplainable fact about this proposition. In addition, the constituents of the proposition are $a$ and the property of being F, or some entities suitably related to $a$ and F, such as Fregean senses. (It would be bizarre to hold that the proposition that $a$ is F has constituents that are completely unrelated to $a$ and F.) But these facts about truth conditions and constituents have nothing to do with each other. They are entirely independent. What an amazing coincidence, then, that the constituents of the proposition are, or are closely related to, exactly the object and property that figure in its truth conditions! If you think that propositions have their truth conditions primitively and you think that they have constituents then you are saddled with this kind of unexplained and arbitrary correspondence.

So, if you reject the demand for an explanation of how propositions have truth conditions then there is considerable pressure on you to regard propositions as simple,

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6 I am indebted here to conversations with Ben Caplan and Chris Tillman.
unstructured, non-composite entities. That in turn leads to even further commitments. Think about the traditional notion of entertainment – the neutral, cognitive relation by which we come into contact with propositions. How should we understand this relation? It cannot be understood as an operation on the constituents of a proposition, since we are now supposing that propositions do not have constituents. What could it be to entertain one of these simple, sui generis propositions? It looks as though entertainment must also be understood as a primitive, unexplainable mental act. The same goes for the act of judgment. Judgment cannot be a mental act performed on the constituents of a proposition, since we have now given up on the idea that propositions have constituents. Nor can judgment be a matter of taking a proposition to be true, since that leads to a regress. *Taking* a proposition to be true is just *judging* it to be true, and so we’ve analyzed one judgment (judging that \( p \)) in terms of another (judging that \( p \) is true). Re-applying the analysis, we’re left with yet another judgment (judging that [that \( p \) is true] is true), and now we’re off on a regress. The lesson is that judgment will also have to be regarded as primitive and unexplainable.

This, then, is where the traditional accounts ends up by taking it to be primitive that propositions have truth conditions. There are simple, unstructured, sui generis entities that have truth conditions as a matter of unexplainable fact. We latch onto these entities via a primitive mental act of entertainment, and then commit ourselves to them via a primitive mental act of judgment. The resulting judgment then takes on the truth conditions of the proposition.
That is about as empty and unsatisfying a philosophical explanation as one is going to find. It is hardly even worth calling it an explanation. But this is where you end up if you accept the traditional account of propositions and reject the unity problem.

One of the central motivations for the act-based conception of propositions is its ability to avoid this explanatory dead-end. The primary or basic bearers of truth conditions are particular token acts of predication. Propositions are types of these actions, which inherit their truth conditions from their tokens. This is one instance of the more general phenomenon of types inheriting properties from their tokens. Consider the Union Jack, the flag of the United Kingdom. Tokens of the Union Jack are rectangular, striped, and partly red and partly blue. But so is the type of flag. It is perfectly natural and commonsensical to say that the Union Jack (the type) is rectangular, striped, partly red and partly blue. But how can this abstract type have these properties? It has them in a secondary or derivative sense. The primary bearers of these properties are tokens of the Union Jack. The fact that the Union Jack, the type, is rectangular, striped, etc. is constituted by the fact that any possible token of this type is rectangular, striped, etc. The type derives these properties from its tokens in the sense that its having these properties is nothing more than the possession of these properties by any of its possible tokens. The same holds for predication and truth conditions. A type of act of predication has truth conditions insofar as any possible token of that type has those truth conditions. This is what I mean when I say that types of acts of predication (propositions) *inherit* their truth conditions from their tokens.

We are now ready to understand Stalnaker’s question. His question was: why do properties have satisfaction conditions? This is the analog for properties of the unity
problem for propositions. Remember that the relevant form of the unity problem for propositions was about explaining how propositions have truth conditions. The analog for properties is a question about satisfaction conditions. Properties are not true or false, but they are satisfied or unsatisfied by objects. The property of being blue is satisfied by an object x just in case x is blue. Stalnaker’s question asks for an explanation of why or how this property has these satisfaction conditions.

Now, the overwhelmingly natural response to this question is to reject the demand for such an explanation. Once again it is easy to feel inclined to say: it is a primitive, ground-floor fact about properties that they have satisfaction conditions. That is just what properties are, by nature or definition — the sorts of things that can be satisfied by objects. I’m fairly sure that Stalnaker thought this was the right response, and it surely is. The point of his question was not to demand an explanation of how properties have satisfaction conditions, but rather to challenge the idea that we have to give a corresponding explanation for propositions.\(^7\) If there’s no need to explain why properties have satisfaction conditions then, similarly, there ought to be no need to explain why propositions have truth conditions. But as we’ve seen, there are good reasons for not rejecting the explanatory demand in the case of propositions. Rejecting the unity problem for propositions leads to a vacuous account of how our thoughts and utterances acquire their truth conditions.

Fortunately, there is a crucial disanalogy between properties and propositions that breaks the parity between the two cases. Propositions are representational and

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\(^7\) Thanks to Gary Ostertag who helped me, through personal communication, to see the point of Stalnaker’s question. See (Ostertag 2013) for his discussion of the problem.
intentional, whereas properties are neither. Truth and falsity are representational properties. A proposition is true when it represents the world to be a certain way and the world is that way.\(^8\) The proposition that \(a\) is \(F\) represents \(a\) as being \(F\). The proposition says that \(a\) is \(F\). This is what it makes it possible for the proposition to be true or false.

Similarly, propositions are intentional. The proposition that \(a\) is \(F\) is about \(a\); it is concerned with or directed at \(a\). These features of propositions, being representational and intentional, call out for philosophical explanation. They are not something that we can reasonably take as primitive and then use to explain the representationality and intentionality of thought and speech. Properties, by contrast, are neither representational nor intentional. A property does not represent the objects in its extension. It does not say anything about those objects, and it is not about them or directed at them. Satisfaction is not a representational or intentional relation. Satisfaction conditions therefore do not pose the same kind of philosophical problem that truth conditions pose.

This means that we can reject the demand for explanation contained in Stalnaker’s question. We can safely take it to be primitive that properties have satisfaction conditions, without thereby undermining the need for an explanation of how propositions have truth conditions.

Platonism about rule-following

\(^8\) Some recent accounts of propositions deny that propositions are representational, e.g. (Speaks 2014a, 2014b) and (Richard 2013). These philosophers hold that propositions have truth conditions but deny that they represent anything. As Soames has pointed out, this commits them to denying the platitude that “truth is a kind of accuracy in representation … a proposition is true when it represents things as they really are,” (Soames 2014, 167). See (Speaks 2014b) for a response, and (Hanks 2015b) for discussion.
But now another problem emerges, which is not so easily solved. The satisfaction conditions of properties play a crucial role in the act-based conception’s explanation of how propositions have truth conditions. That explanation, recall, starts with the idea that particular token acts of predication are the basic or primary bearers of truth conditions. Why do these token acts of have truth conditions? Because they are acts of rule-governed sorting or classifying or categorizing. To predicate the property of being F of a is to sort a with other objects, where the property of being F provides the standard of correctness for this act of sorting. When you sort a according to this property you can get it right or wrong — your act can be correct or incorrect. What condition must be met in order to correctly sort a according to this property? Well, it has to be that a has that property, that a is F. Being F is the condition that a must meet if this act of sorting is to be correct. This is the sense in which the property provides the standard of correctness for the act of sorting. Furthermore, the act of predication has truth conditions because it is subject to this standard of correctness. The truth or falsity of an act of predication is just a matter of whether the object is correctly or incorrectly sorted or classified or categorized. But a is correctly sorted with the other F’s just in case a satisfies F. The satisfaction conditions for the property F are the correctness conditions for acts of predicking F of objects. The possession of truth conditions by acts of predication thus depends crucially and directly on the possession of satisfaction conditions by properties.

Following our answer to the Stalnaker question, we are now taking it to be primitive that properties have satisfaction conditions. We are viewing properties as mind and language independent entities that have satisfaction conditions by their natures or essences. We are then using these properties to explain how token acts of predication
have truth conditions. We latch onto them and apply them to objects in acts of predication. Through their satisfaction conditions properties provide the standards of correctness for these acts of predication. Any such act is correct (true) or incorrect (false) depending on whether the object satisfies the property.

This picture of how our acts of predication come to be correct or incorrect has variously been called “classical realism” about meaning (Kripke 1982, Wilson 1994, 1998, 2006) and the “classical account of extension” (Wilson 1982), the “rules-as-rails” conception of meaning (Wright 1989a, 1989b), and “Platonism” about meaning (Wright 2001, Zalabardo 2003). It is the picture of rule-following that Wittgenstein seems to have in mind when he discusses the “superlative fact” which you grasp “in a flash” when you grasp the meaning of a word (PI 191-2), and in his image of “rails invisibly laid to infinity” (PI 218), which lay down ahead of time the conditions that have to be met in order for any possible application of a word to be correct. George Wilson sums up the picture as follows:

If a speaker means something by a general term ‘Φ’, then the speaker has adopted a rule that specifies the standards of correctness for ‘Φ’ as she proposes to use it. The rule, we may suppose, has for her the form: ‘Φ’ (as I shall use it) is to be ascribed to an object o just in case o satisfies those conditions, where the conditions are given by some property or properties that the speaker has suitably in mind. These conditions are comprised of properties that exist independently of language and are exemplified (when they are), independently of our ability to ratify the relevant facts. (Wilson 2006, 153)

The point in Wilson’s last sentence is worth emphasizing. On this Platonist account (as I will call it), the property associated with a word provides an objective standard of correctness for applications of that word. It is an objective matter whether an object satisfies a property. Whether it is correct or incorrect to apply a predicate to an object is
settled independently of any of our views about whether it is correct or our ability to
determine if it is correct. It is possible for all of us, individually and collectively, to get it
wrong about whether an object satisfies a property. In fact, the Platonist picture can be
viewed as a natural outcome of this demand for objectivity. By locating the source of
correctness conditions in mind and language independent entities, which have their
satisfaction conditions primitively and completely independently of us, Platonism offers a
very pure account of how acts of predication are subject to objective standards of
evaluation.

There is also an important epistemological dimension to the Platonist picture.
Properties not only provide the correctness conditions for acts of predication, they must
also serve as guides for our classificatory activities. Suppose you are trying to decide
whether to sort a marble into the pile with the other blue marbles. The property of being
blue provides the condition that the marble must meet in order to be correctly sorted into
that pile. You have to decide, then, whether the marble meets this condition. If your
decision is disconnected from this condition — if the condition plays no role in your
deliberations — then whatever decision you reach will be unjustified (cf. Zalabardo
1997). It’s not enough just to examine the marble. Your apprehension of the condition
determined by the property of being blue must play a role in this examination. In
examining the marble you have to check to see whether it has the feature determined by
the property of being blue that something must have in order to satisfy it. If your
decision about how to sort the marble is not informed by this property then any decision
you make will be no better than a guess. It would be like saying ‘It’s raining’ without
paying any heed to the conditions that have to be met for it to be raining. For our acts of
predication to be justified, then, it has to be that we engage with the properties that provide their standards of correctness. Given that properties provide these standards of correctness, for our acts of predication to be justified we must use them as guides in our predicative activities.

As we will see, these two roles for properties on the Platonist account, i.e. their provision of objective standards of correctness, and their role as guides for acts of predication, are the source of the problems for Platonism. The demand for objectivity leads the Platonist to view properties as transcendent entities, utterly removed and independent of minds and languages – a view which is reinforced by the idea that properties are primitive bearers of satisfaction conditions. This leads to metaphysical problems about making sense of how we are capable of latching onto these properties in order to fix correctness conditions for our acts of predication. This same transcendence is the source of epistemological problems about understanding how we could possibly be guided by properties in our acts of predication. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before discussing these problems I want to forestall an objection.

The Platonist view as discussed in the rule-following literature is an account of the meanings of words – in particular, the meanings of predicates. The view is that meaning something by a predicate is a matter of associating a property with that predicate, where the property provides the standards of correctness for applications of that predicate to objects. Because of the emphasis on words and meaning, one might be tempted to think that the Platonist account can be decoupled from the theory of predication. Some acts of predication are linguistic and involve words, but not all of them do. Acts of predication can occur in thought. When I judge that $a$ is $F$ I mentally
predicate $F$ of $a$, and no words have to be involved in this act of predication. Acts of predication can also be perceptual or behavioral. When sorting the marbles I am performing acts of predication that involve looking at the marbles and physically putting them into different piles. I can do all of that without uttering any words, either outwardly or in my head. These are non-linguistic, mental or perceptual or behavioral forms of predication. Given that the Platonist picture is about the meanings of words, it is tempting to say that it is irrelevant to understanding how these non-linguistic acts of predication come to have correctness and truth conditions. Furthermore, if mental or perceptual or behavioral acts of predication are the explanatorily basic bearers of representation and intentionality, then we could make these kinds of acts our sole focus and relegate linguistic acts of predication to secondary status. The act-based conception of propositions would then become the view that propositions are types of cognitive acts of predication (where ‘cognitive’ covers non-linguistic judgment, perception, and intentional behavior). Insofar as these cognitive acts are independent of language, considerations about the meanings of linguistic expressions are irrelevant.

There are two things to say in response. The first is that any non-linguistic, cognitive act of predication seems to involve or require a mental act of predication, and there is a widespread view in cognitive science according to which mental acts of predication employ linguistic vehicles, although not necessarily expressions in a public language (Fodor 1975, 2008). If there is a Language of Thought, then a mental act of predicking $F$ of $a$ consists in combining a mentalese expression for $a$ with a mentalese expression for $F$. The Platonist picture can then be reinstated through its account of the meanings of mentalese predicates. These predicates are meaningful because they are
associated, perhaps by naturalistic relations, with properties that provide standards of correctness for their application.

But, secondly, and more importantly, there is no need to adopt the Language of Thought hypothesis in order to tie the Platonist account to non-linguistic acts of predication. Any act of predication is an act of sorting an object according to a rule. Performing an act of predication therefore requires determining a rule for this act of sorting. That is, it requires determining correctness conditions. According to the Platonist account, properties are the source of these correctness conditions. We fix upon a rule for an act of sorting by fixing on a property. In a linguistic act of predication this act of fixing on a property is mediated by a linguistic expression. First the property is associated with the expression, and then applications of this expression take on the correctness conditions given by the property. In non-linguistic predication no linguistic vehicle is involved. In these cases, the subject gives her act of predication correctness conditions in a direct and unmediated way by singling out a property. This is still the Platonist picture, just without linguistic intermediaries. Following Wilson’s formulation, we can state this general form of Platonism as follows:

If a subject engages in an act of predication then the subject has adopted a rule that specifies the standards of correctness for that act of predication. The rule, we may suppose, has for her the form: this act of predication, targeted at object \( o \), is correct just in case \( o \) satisfies \( those \ conditions \), where the conditions are given by some property or properties that the subject has suitably in mind. These conditions are comprised of properties that exist independently of language and are exemplified (when they are), independently of our ability to ratify the relevant facts.

This generalized version of Platonism applies to any act of predication, whether it involves words or not. In the remainder of this paper by ‘Platonism’ I will mean this more general picture.
The metaphysical and epistemological problems for Platonism

As I mentioned earlier, there are two sorts of problems for the Platonist view, one metaphysical and the other epistemological. Let’s start with the metaphysical problems.

Although not presented in quite these terms, the metaphysical difficulties for Platonism have their clearest and best known expression in Kripke’s book on Wittgenstein (Kripke 1982).9 What facts about me, my mental states or my behavior, determine one property as opposed to another as the standard of correctness for an act of predication? For example, why does the property of being blue give the correctness condition for my act of sorting the marble, as opposed to the property of being bleen?10 Kripke’s Wittgenstein finally reaches the conclusion that there is nothing about me that determines one property as opposed to infinitely many others. Nothing in my past behavior, or any instructions I might give myself, or mental images I might entertain determines one property out of infinitely many deviant alternatives. Furthermore, although this is more of a vexed issue, my dispositions for sorting the marbles are not sufficient to determine blue instead of some bleen-like property.11 After considering

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9 Kripke presents his Wittgensteinian skeptical arguments as a general challenge to the existence of semantic facts, e.g. the fact that Jones means blue by ‘blue’. We can read them, however, not as arguments for a global skepticism about meaning, but as a challenge to one particular picture of what meaning facts consist in, namely the Platonist picture. See (Wilson 1994, 1998, 2006) for a reading of Kripke along these lines.

10 Something is bleen iff ether it is observed before some future time t and blue or it is green. ‘Bleen’ is a close cousin of ‘grue’, both of which are due to (Goodman 1983).

11 See (Kripke 1982, 22-37) for the original discussion of the dispositionalist response, and (Boghossian 1989) for an overview of the problems and prospects for dispositionalism in the wake of Kripke’s discussion. One problem for dispositionalism that hasn’t received much attention (although see Boghossian 2015) is that it gets the
these and other proposals, Kripke concludes on Wittgenstein’s behalf that there are no facts about me that succeed in singling out any property to be the standard of correctness for my act of predication. I won’t rehearse the battery of detailed arguments that Kripke provides for this conclusion, and I can’t review the large literature that responds to these arguments. It is enough for my purposes to point out that the theory of predication we have so far been considering faces the skeptical challenge that Kripke presents in his book on Wittgenstein. That theory of predication assumes that we identify properties and use them to impose standards of correctness on our acts of predication. Kripke’s skeptical challenge demands that we explain exactly how we single out properties to serve as these standards of correctness.

Now, it might be thought that Kripke overlooked an easy and obvious answer to his skeptical challenge (cf. Zalabardo 2003). Maybe we have a quasi-perceptual faculty for grasping properties. Russell thought that “it is obvious … that we are acquainted with such universals as white, red, black, sweet, sour, loud, hard, etc.” (Russell 1912, 101). But this proposal has to be developed carefully in order to avoid Kripke’s skeptical arguments. On Russell’s account, we become acquainted with universals by a process of abstraction from particulars. First we are acquainted with the various blue marbles (or, in Russell’s case, with the corresponding sense data). By a process of abstraction on these marbles (or sense data) we become acquainted with the property of blue found in each. But what determines that this process of abstraction determines the property of being blue

order of explanation wrong. Intuitively, you are disposed to sort the blue marbles into the blue pile because you are sorting according to the property of being blue. According to the dispositionalist response, however, the situation is exactly the reverse: you are sorting according to the property of being blue because you are disposed to sort the blue marbles into the separate pile.
as opposed to the property of being bleen? How does abstraction lead us to the blue-ness of the marbles instead of their bleen-ness? Perhaps it is a matter of attending to the blue-ness of the marbles instead of their bleen-ness. But how do you do that? Any blue marble we have observed before $t$ is also bleen, and its blue color is also its bleen color. So how can you attend to its blue-ness without also attending to its bleen-ness? These questions land us back into the realm of Kripkean skeptical considerations that this move was supposed to avoid. Better, then, not to follow Russell in giving an abstractionist account of how we grasp properties. In fact, better not to give any substantive or reductive account of how we become acquainted with properties, since any such account will be exposed to the Kripke-Wittgenstein skeptical challenge. Any substantive account of how I grasp a property will supply conditions that can be reinterpreted in such a way that they count as acquaintance with a deviant property. Grasping a property looks like it has to be understood as a sui generis, primitive form of cognitive contact between a subject and a property. The properties are out there, and through a primitive mental act of grasping we single them out for our acts of predication.

If we were dissatisfied with the earlier account of propositional representation, on which propositions are primitive bearers of truth conditions that we come into contact with through primitive relations of entertainment and judgment, then I think we should be equally dissatisfied with this appeal to a primitive mental act of grasping properties. The two views look disturbingly similar. The first view posits primitive bearers of truth conditions and primitive relations of entertainment and judgment. The account of predication we are now considering posits primitive bearers of satisfaction conditions and a primitive relation of grasping or acquaintance. We have made some progress, since we
are not taking representation or intentionality to be primitive, but the explanation of how acts of predication acquire their correctness conditions still looks empty and unsatisfying.

But let’s suppose that these metaphysical problems can be solved and that a satisfying explanation can be given of how a subject singles out a property and thereby imposes standards of correctness on her act of predication. This leaves untouched the epistemological problems for Platonism. The clearest and most forceful articulation of these problems can be found in Crispin Wright’s work on the rule-following considerations (collected in Wright 2001). Recall the epistemological role for properties in the Platonist account. In order for an act of predication to be justified, the subject has to be guided by whatever determines the standard of correctness for that act. Since, on the Platonist view, properties determine these standards of correctness, it follows that properties must serve as guides for our acts of predication. The epistemological problems have to do with making sense of how we could be so guided.

These problems can be put in the form of dilemma. Either I am guided by a property through a direct, intuitive grasp of what the property requires, or I am guided indirectly, through concrete instructions or a formula or template. The first horn just adds another bit of primitive machinery to the account of predication we have just been considering. There are mind and language independent primitive bearers of satisfaction conditions, which we latch onto through a primitive relation of grasping or acquaintance, and which guide us in our acts of predication through primitive acts of intuition. This is exactly the sort of philosophically unsatisfying explanation that we are trying to avoid by adopting the act-based conception of propositions. Perhaps we could streamline the view by collapsing the relations of grasping and intuition into one. That is, perhaps we single
out properties and intuit their requirements through a single, primitive relation of grasping/intuition. That simplifies the view, but it doesn’t dispel any of its mysteriousness. Furthermore, as Wright has emphasized, respecting the objectivity of the standard provided by a property means that we have to recognize the possibility of wrongly intuiting the standards of correctness determined by a property (Wright 1989a, 161). It has to possible for me to know all the relevant facts about the object in question and still get it wrong about whether it satisfies a property because I have incorrectly intuited the conditions determined by that property for an object to fall under it. What would it be to incorrectly intuit the requirements of a property in this way? There is nothing to say about this, since we have bundled away the notions of grasping and intuiting into a black box. As Wright puts it, “nothing can be done by way of filling out the thought that, in the most primitive cases of rule-following, when everything seems immediate and beyond further account, we nevertheless track a set of independent requirements,” (Wright 1989a, 161).

The second horn, on which I am guided by a property indirectly through instructions of some kind, either leads back to the first horn or it generates a regress. Suppose the instructions I give myself for sorting the marbles consists of a blue tile, which I use as a guide in sorting the marbles. I make decisions about how to sort the marbles by comparing them with the blue tile. The problem is that the tile on its own cannot guide me in sorting the marbles. I need some further instructions or interpretation about how to use it. When I compare a marble with the tile, what am I looking for? How do I use the tile to decide whether the marble should be sorted into the separate pile? The obvious answer is that I am checking to see whether the marble is similar in color to the
tile. That is the additional instruction I am using alongside the blue tile. It is the blue tile, along with the instruction to check for similarity in color, which serves as a guide in my acts of predication. But now the whole problem re-occurs, since I am in effect sorting the marbles according to the property *similar in color to this tile*. How can I be guided by this property in sorting the marbles? Our original dilemma now arises all over again. Either I directly intuit this property, or I have some instructions that indirectly inform me about its requirements. The first option puts us back on the first horn of the dilemma, and the second starts off a regress.

It might be tempting to think that these problems can be avoided if the instructions are mental items, rather than physical or material objects of some kind. Maybe a blue tile on its own cannot guide me in sorting the marbles, but a mental image of blueness could. But this gets us nowhere. A mental image is no more capable of fixing its own interpretation than a concrete blue tile. As Wittgenstein points out in the Blue Book, the temptation to think otherwise is based on the tendency to endow the mental with an “occult character”, which allows it to “bring about effects which no material mechanism could,” (Wittgenstein 1960, 3-5). He recommends the following as a way to resist this tendency:

There is a way of avoiding at least partly the occult appearance of the processes of thinking, and it is to replace in these processes any working of the imagination by acts of looking at real objects. Thus it may seem essential that, at least in certain cases, when I hear the word “red” with understanding, a red image should be before the mind’s eye. But why should I not substitute seeing a red bit of paper for imagining a red patch? The visual image will only be the more vivid. (Wittgenstein 1960, 4)

Take the blue mental image that occurs to you while sorting the marbles and replace it with a corresponding blue piece of paper. Or, somewhat more fancifully, imagine that
you could take the mental image out of your mind and convert it into a concrete image. If the latter is insufficient for guiding your sorting behavior then so is the former. The idea that the mental image is capable of something that the material image is not is a confusion borne of giving the mind magical powers.

We have seen, then, that there are serious metaphysical and epistemological problems for the Platonist account of how acts of predication acquire their standards of correctness. The metaphysical problems arise when we try to give an account of how a subject singles out a property that will provide this standard of correctness. The epistemological problems arise when we try to make sense of how a subject is guided by this property in making decisions about which acts of predication to perform. The difficulties these problems present tend to lead us to give up the attempt at explaining any of this, and to treat the relations of grasping and intuiting properties as primitive. The resulting picture of how acts of predication acquire their correctness conditions, which posits primitive bearers of satisfaction conditions, and primitive relations of grasping and intuiting, is not much of an advance over the traditional account of propositions, which, in order to avoid the unity problem, has to posit primitive bearers of truth conditions and primitive relations of entertainment and judgment. To make progress we are going to have to abandon Platonism and look elsewhere for an account of how acts of predication are capable of being correct or incorrect.

Objectivity, justification, and generality

As I mentioned in the introduction, I do not have an alternative to Platonism. Such an alternative would extend the explanatory strategy of the act-based conception of
propositions by providing a non-Platonistic account of how acts of predication acquire their correctness conditions. I do not currently know how to do this. Or rather, I do not know how to provide an alternative to Platonism that can meet the twin demands of preserving objectivity in the standards of correctness for acts of predication and our justification for those acts.

Consider, for example, a communitarian account of correctness conditions, on which the correctness of an act of predication is a matter of whether other people would evaluate it as correct. On this view, when I sort a marble into the pile with the other blue marbles, this act of sorting is correct just in case some sufficient number of people in my community would agree that the marble belongs in that pile. Correctness, then, consists in agreement with other people’s opinions or assessment of whether an act of predication is correct.

Properties, understood as primitive bearers of satisfaction conditions, play no role in this version of communitarianism. The standard of correctness for an act of predication does not come from a property but rather from what other people do or would say about whether the act is correct. There is another form of communitarianism on which properties still play this role. This is, in effect, a communal form of Platonism. On this view, the facts that single out properties to serve as standards of correctness are facts about whole communities, not individuals taken one by one. This view is easiest to

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12 This communitarian account is not the Skeptical Solution that Kripke offers on behalf of Wittgenstein in (Kripke 1982), although it bears affinities to the Skeptical Solution. The Skeptical Solution supplies assertability conditions for semantic claims of the form ‘Jones means blue by ‘blue’’ which depend on agreement between the ways in which Jones uses the word ‘blue’ and the way others in his community are disposed to use this word. The communitarian account, by contrast, supplies correctness conditions for Jones’s uses the word ‘blue’ that depend on this agreement.
make sense of when taken as an account of the meanings of predicates. The predicate ‘blue’ means the property of being blue because of community wide facts about how people use the word ‘blue’. My meaning blue by ‘blue’, and hence being subject to this standard of correctness when I apply the word ‘blue’, is a matter of my being a member of this linguistic community. It is harder to make sense of this view when applied to non-linguistic acts of predication. What facts about the community could figure in determining the property that I am going to use for sorting the pile of marbles? It is not at all clear what to say about this. The communitarian account is also exposed to the same metaphysical and epistemological problems that its individualistic version faces. What facts about the community as a whole single out one property as opposed to infinitely many other non-standard alternatives? Furthermore, given that a property has been determined, how can individuals in the community be guided by it in their acts of predication? The shift from an individual to a community doesn’t seem to offer much hope for progress on these questions.

The communitarian account we are now considering is a genuine alternative to Platonism. It dispenses with properties altogether and locates the source of correctness directly in the actual and potential verdicts that people in the community would give if queried about the appropriateness of an act of predication. The obvious problem for this form of communitarianism is the loss of objectivity that it entails. McDowell articulates this conception of objectivity in a well-known passage:

The idea at risk is the idea of things being thus and so anyway, whether or not we choose to investigate the matter in question, and whatever the outcome of any such investigation. That idea requires the conception of how things could correctly be said to be anyway — whatever, if anything, we in fact go on to say about the matter … (McDowell 1986, 46)
The example I’ve been using so far, of sorting out the blue marbles, may not be the best one for illustrating this point, since you might think that it is not an entirely objective matter whether something is blue (e.g. because you think that colors are secondary qualities). So suppose that the marbles are made of different materials — glass, plastic, metal, and agate — and I am sorting the glass marbles into a separate pile. Whether a marble is made of glass is a thoroughly objective matter, which is independent of what any or all of us might think or say about it. We might all collectively get it wrong about whether a marble is made of glass, even after careful and thorough examination. This is the conception of objectivity that is put under threat by the communitarian account. According to this account, it is correct to predicate being made of glass of a marble just in case a sufficient number of us are disposed to accept this act of predication as correct. It is a short step from this to the absurd sounding conclusion that the marble is made of glass just in case a sufficient number of us are inclined to say that it is made of glass.

The communitarian account must also answer the epistemological questions that arose for Platonism. If our acts of predication are to be justified, it must be that we are somehow guided by the facts that determine the standards of correctness for those acts. On the communitarian account, these are facts about the opinions of other people in the community. It follows that in order for an act of predication to be justified, I have to check to see whether a sufficient number of other people in my community would agree to that act of predication. We rarely do that when performing acts of predication. We blithely go about categorizing things in our everyday acts of judgment and assertion without paying any attention to whether there is a consensus behind those acts. Given the communitarian account, this leads to wide-ranging skepticism. If correctness is a matter
of communal agreement, and we are not generally guided by considerations about such agreement when performing acts of predication, then it turns out that these acts of predication are unjustified. The communitarian account manages to combine an anti-realist abandonment of objectivity with general epistemological skepticism. It is a genuine alternative to Platonism, but it is not something we should want anything to do with.

A viable alternative to Platonism, then, will preserve objectivity in the correctness conditions for acts of predication while not leading to wholesale skepticism about the justification for those acts. When I say that I do not have an alternative to Platonism, what I mean is that I don’t have an alternative that meets these desiderata.

I would like to close by considering a third desideratum, whose status is less firm than those of objectivity and the avoidance of skepticism. One of the appealing features of Platonism is its generality – the way in which it provides a single, universal account of how acts of predication acquire their correctness conditions. Although the properties involved vary from one act of predication to another, the general story about the role of properties in endowing acts of predication with correctness conditions stays fixed. Despite its other faults, the communitarian view also exhibits this level of generality. The communitarian account provides a short, neat statement of what it takes for an act of predication to be correct – it has to be accepted, or would be accepted, by a sufficient number of people in the relevant community. The third desideratum for an alternative to Platonism, then, is that it tells this sort of general story about the source of correctness conditions for acts of predication.
Abandoning this desideratum would mean abandoning the search for a *theory* about how acts of predication acquire their correctness conditions. Perhaps it is possible to give accounts of correctness conditions on a case-by-case basis. When I’m sorting out the blue marbles there is a feature in the marbles themselves that I am looking for — a feature that I can point to and illustrate by holding up one of the marbles. Correctness in this case, then, is a matter of whether a marble exhibits this feature. If I am sorting out the marbles that are made of glass I’ll have to tell a different story about what it takes for an act of predication to be correct. In that case, the story will refer to the material constitution of the marbles. What we have to resist is the thought that these two accounts can be unified into a more general theory about where the correctness conditions for acts of predication come from.

The idea that we have to give up on theorizing and content ourselves with descriptions of particular cases is a familiar theme in the *Investigations*:

> And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize these workings; *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them. (*PI* 109)

These and similar remarks are usually read as expressions of quietism. In the present context, quietism takes the form of Wittgenstein’s refusal to offer an alternative to the Platonist picture that he undermines with the rule-following considerations. This refusal is usually met with dissatisfaction or frustration (e.g. Wright 1989, 169). But I think it helps to see this refusal, not as simple, stubborn unwillingness to say anything constructive, but rather as a rejection of the philosophical urge for generality. There are
plenty of things we can say about how our acts of predication acquire their correctness conditions, but these explanations will be local and piecemeal. The problems may come when we try to unify everything together into a single global account.

References


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