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ON THE NATURE OF THE PROPOSITION

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Abstract: I present here my criticism of Chateaubriand's account of propositions as having an identifying character with respect to reality. I claim that (meaningful) propositions are better understood as pictures of possible states-of-affairs, and that this account is more natural considering the acts of judgment that are at the origin of propositions. I also present a possible way of understanding the notion of a possible state-of-affairs that takes care of the seemingly absurd case of necessarily false, but meaningful propositions (such as false mathematical propositions).

Key-words: Chateaubriand. Propositions. States-of-affairs. Meaningfulness. Possibility.

Chateaubriand's book "Logical Forms" is an impressive attempt at a philosophical system, although restricted to the areas of Logic, Philosophy of Language and Epistemology. As is usual in such cases the author has an agenda and many cherished ideas. For instance, that propositions have an "identifying" character with respect to reality. This is but one aspect of the author "objectivism" that I find philosophically objectionable. And the reason is that I do not think that we can give a

correct account of the nature of propositions without bringing into the picture subjects and their intentions in using language.

A central feature of Chateaubriand's book is a thorough commitment to a realist theory of truth. For him a true assertion describes an aspect of reality. Chateaubriand believes that this goes hand in hand with the view that propositions always refer to (describe, identify, point in the direction of) *reality itself*. Firstly, I do not accept that this is "the natural" way of looking at propositions. And the strongest argument that it is not lies, of course, in the fact that there are false propositions. Although a proposition may "intend", so to speak, to describe reality, it sometimes fails to do so. Moreover, one may use propositions – e.g., in counterfactuals – to refer *intentionally* to non-actual possibilities. Secondly, I believe that it is possible to hold a realist theory of truth – in which the truth of an assertion depends solely on what is *in fact* the case – without considering propositions as vectors pointing to or away from reality itself.

Taking the language of science and mathematics as the model for language in general, as I believe Chateaubriand does, can easily lead to such a view on the nature of the proposition, for science is after all solely concerned with describing reality. But in general language serves many other purposes, like creating fictional "realities" for instance.

Chateaubriand seems also to believe that the connection with reality is an *intrinsic* feature of propositions, which are, themselves, always at our disposal whenever *we* may want to identify this or that aspect of reality – like tools at our disposal should the opportunity appear for them to be useful. But how can this be so? Any directness propositions have can only be a residue of a more fundamental intentionality present at their origin, which, I believe, lies in *acts* of judging. It is, after all, by abstracting ideal contents out of real acts of judging that propositions, or propositional senses, are constituted, and the directiveness of propositions is what is left in them from the original intentionality of the judgment act. So, if we want to know what propositions describe (denote, individuate, indicate, point to, or what have you) we must

investigate what a judging consciousness in general *intends* to accomplish in judging.

However, faithful to a philosophical tradition that flees in horror from the simple mention of subjective aspects in logic (for Frege supposedly showed us that this is a sure sign of dreadful psychologism¹), Chateaubriand ignores completely the problem of the genesis of propositions in *acts* of judgment (in fact his realism precludes any questioning of such a nature). Also, more to the point, he fails to acknowledge that in judging we are not only trying to describe reality as it is, but also in general depicting – by false opinions and beliefs, misjudgments of any sort, or just plain lies – *alternative* realities.

As for false assertions, Chateaubriand believes that they are “lost bullets”, which aimed at something end up hitting a completely different target. By asserting falsely that Theaetetus is flying, he says, I’m in fact somehow identifying the state of affairs <other-than-flying, Theaetetus>, even though I never intended such a thing. This is counter-intuitive and fails to do justice to the intentions present in the act of judging. It makes more sense to say that by asserting that Theaetetus is flying I depict a *possible* aspect of reality. Since this assertion is false, it does not connect with reality itself, but, since it is after all a meaningful assertion, it is still a picture of how reality *could* have been². Playing with possible scenarios has an important role in our mental lives and is necessarily reflected in language.

I believe that a proposition is not an arrow pointing to – or away from – reality, or a tag to be attached, like a name, to aspects of it. It is instead, or so I think, a description of a *possible* reality (which may turn

¹ Even though Frege’s anti-psychologism was relevant for the establishment of a *positive* science of logic, it eventually degenerated into an ostensive attitude of aversion towards all subjective considerations in logic – no matter how alien to psychologism proper – that made it very difficult for Frege’s followers to overcome the philosophical naïveté intrinsic to objective logic.

² Of course, we are talking about logical, not physical possibility.

out to be actual too). After all, in the fundamental phenomenon, the *act* of judging, we not only want to describe reality, but also, sometimes intentionally, to *misdescribe* it – the adequate metaphor of a proposition in pictorial terms is not a photograph, but a painting, which has more to do with imagination than with memory³.

In short, a *meaningful* proposition is a representation of a *possible* aspect of reality. But because this formulation involves modal elements – and so is bound to conjure the usual “catilinalia” against the messy morasses of modality – let me try and clarify a bit what I have in mind.

Judging in fact presupposes a lot, in particular a previous determination of which states of affairs can *in principle* be actual – or, in other words, which states of affairs are possible in principle – since we cannot judge *meaningfully* about what cannot *in principle* be the case. Any act of judgment is set against a background of possibilities determined *a priori*, and the determination of what can be a fact before experiencing the facts is, of course, a job for transcendental subjectivity. Let us clarify this a bit more.

A subject considered in general determines *a priori* which states of affairs he cannot rule out as contents of future experiences. For instance, although he cannot rule out Theaetetus flying, he can exclude from the field of possibilities the experience of running into a blue virtue, or a depressed prime number. The subject accomplishes these determinations not by mere induction, but as a true transcendental agent. After all, questions of principle are at stake.

By doing this, subjectivity determines also which assertions are to be considered meaningful. Namely, those that on top of *formal* display also *material* sense, the former depending on the conformity of the syntactic elements of the enunciation to *a priori* laws of the combination of syntactic categories, the latter on the conformity of their referents to *a priori* laws

³ In *Theaetetus* Plato tries to account for the possibility of false judgements in terms of tricks played by memory.

regulating objective contents (objects and objective properties and relations), which amounts to an *a priori* determination of the subject's field of possible experiences. No judging is possible independently of this previous work, if it is judging indeed and not mere sound signifying nothing.

A proposition is a sort of picture of a possible state of affairs of the world provided it is a meaningful proposition, and conversely, a proposition is said to be meaningful if it describes – or identifies – a *possible* situation. A possible situation, in its turn, is one that cannot be ruled out *a priori* as an absurd incongruity like the depressed prime number (but not flying Theaetetus), i.e. one that conjoins compatible elements of reality exclusively (keeping in mind that the determination of relations of compatibility and incompatibility of objective contents is a transcendental task). A meaningful proposition can then be conceived as a representation of reality. The proposition *itself* does not necessarily refer to reality as it is, but it can be used – sometimes inadequately – to this end. In this case it is the *act* trying to establish this reference that is faulty. Asserting something may be construed as the *claim* that reality is indeed as represented in the assertion. An assertion is false when the possibility it proposes and reality do not coincide. A false proposition is then no more a mystery than the claim that an unfaithful picture depicts an aspect of reality.

Chateaubriand considers a modal treatment of propositions, but dismisses it right away. The reason is that there are meaningful propositions that are *necessarily* false, like $2+2=5$. If they describe a possible state of affairs, as I claimed above, there must exist impossible possibilities! The way out of this dilemma lies in the correct understanding of what “possible” means in this context. Since the material meaningfulness of propositions depends on compatibility of material *types* exclusively, not *instances* of types, it may happen that certain contents are materially compatible, i.e. compatible considered *solely* as elements of certain types, but not in fact compatible as the *particular*

elements they are. $2+2$, for instance, could have been equal to 5, considered *exclusively* as numbers (for any two numbers are compatible with respect to equality), but not as the particular numbers they are. $2+2=5$ is *a priori* possible (since it is a situation described by a meaningful proposition), but *a posteriori* (i.e. after calculation) impossible. If you think all this is nonsense, answer fast: is $153448+93745 = 248193$ possible? What about the Riemann hypothesis?

We need of course a notion of possibility that renders open mathematical questions possible regardless of our knowing whether they are true or false. This is provided by the notion of (syntactic and semantic) meaningfulness. Of course this is a weak notion of possibility, but one that clearly corresponds to (in fact coincides with) the intuitive notion of possibility related to meaningfulness. But the point I want to stress is that determinations of possibility in this sense emanate from a subjectivity playing a transcendental role. And hence a theory of the nature of the proposition must take into account an analysis of judging subjectivity. Helas, all that is missing in Chateaubriand's account (but I cannot say I'm really surprised).