Metaphysics: Propositions John Turri

1. Realism about propositions

The argument for realism about propositions resembles the argument for realism about properties. It is broadly explanatory. Realists point to facts about assertion and thought to motivate their view.

Assertion. When you utter a declarative sentence in the indicative mood, you assert something. What is it that you assert? (A) It is not a sentence. You could have asserted the same thing using a different sentence. Had you uttered 'Steven is listening' or 'Steven está escuchando', you would have asserted the same thing. Generally speaking, you could always assert the same thing differently, either with a different sentence in the same language (e.g. active to passive), or with a sentence from a different language. (B) It is not any concrete particular or property picked out by elements of the sentence. When you utter 'Steven is listening', you are not asserting Steven himself. Neither are you asserting the property of listening. An additional relevant consideration: what you assert has a truth value, and neither physical objects nor properties have truth values. (C) We can properly identify what you assert by using a dependent clause, a **that-clause**. You asserted that Steven is listening. 'that Steven is listening' occupies the object position in this sentence. That which occupies the object position is a noun, and nouns name things. So the dependent clause 'that Steven is listening' names something. It names what you assert. Notice also that the very same clause, 'that Steven is listening', can occupy the subject position too, as in the sentence 'That Steven is listening is doubtful' and 'That Steven is listening guarantees that someone is listening'. (D) This second sentence is especially interesting, partly because it reveals that the referents of that-clauses enter into entailment relations. Moreover, because this second sentence is true, it strongly suggests that the referents of thatclauses are not sentences, for sentences don't guarantee one another. Consider: That Steven is listening guarantees that someone is listening, but the sentence 'Steven is listening' does not guarantee the sentence 'someone is listening'. (E) Notice also that someone else might have been asserting the very same thing as you, at the very same time. So whatever you assert is simultaneously available to others.

<u>Thoughts</u>. Most of what we said about assertions can likewise be said about thoughts. When you form a belief, you believe something. What is it that you believe? You don't believe a sentence, because you could have believed the same thing despite thinking in a different language. You don't believe a physical object or a property, because these things don't have truth values, whereas what you believe does. What you believe can guarantee other things, and so can also be the subject of predication. What you believe can simultaneously be believed by others, so it is publicly available.

What you assert or believe can be true (or false). If it is true (or false), then it would have been true (or false) regardless of whether you, or anyone else for that matter, asserted or believed it. In short, what you assert is mind-independent and has its truth value independently of mind and language.

Realists about propositions claim that propositions are mindindependent, non-physical, publicly available referents of thatclauses, which function as the objects of assertion and belief, are the primary bearers of truth value, and the things that enter into logical relations with one another. The hypothesis that propositions exist simply and elegantly explains all the data marshaled here.

2. Nominalism about propositions

Nominalists prefer to not admit propositions into their ontology. Their primary critical response is to claim that we can explain all of the data without positing non-physical things.

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3. Metalinguistic nominalism about propositions

Metalinguistic nominalism about propositions is the view that sentences—understood as concrete particular orthographic inscriptions or utterances—are what we believe and assert.

What can be said on behalf of this view? Sentences of course have truth value. Sentences are publicly available. Sentences can be named by that-clauses

Shortcomings of this view. Sentences are not mind-independent entities—they rely for their existence on the existence (at one time or another) of minds. As noted earlier, generally speaking, you can always assert the same thing differently, either with a different sentence in the same language, or with a sentence from a different language; but this is inconsistent with the view under consideration. Closely related to the previous point, if the view under consideration is true, the English speaker who believes that Steven is listening believes something different from the Spanish speaker who believes that Steven está escuchando. It's not clear that sentences entail one another. You could always have one sentence without another, so in what sense would one sentence quarantee another? (You might say, "Well, the truth of one sentence could guarantee the truth of another." But a concrete particular sentence is true only if it exists. So sentence A could guarantee the truth of another sentence only if A could guarantee the existence of the other.)

4. Austere nominalism about propositions

Consider the following view, which we might call "austere nominalism about propositions." It involves several components. (Note: I doubt that this type of nominalism is plausible when conjoined with a rejection of *all* non-physical entities.)

Replace sentential complements with infinitive phrases in the object place. To say you believe Steven is listening is to say you believe Steven to be listening. ('Steven' is the actor of the infinitive

'to be listening'.)

These infinitive phrases pick out *events*. Events are spatiotemporal particulars—they occur at specific times and places. They are not repeatable. An event is, basically, something's being a particular way at a particular time. Natural science countenances events, so nominalists should have no problem with them.

Events are publicly available, and can be picked out by people speaking different languages.

Events (the non-mental ones, at least) are mind-independent entities.

Sentences and thoughts are the primary bearers of truth value. They are *made true* (or false) by the relevant event's occurring (or not occurring).

One event's occurring can entail the occurrence of another. E.g. my mother's arriving guarantees one of my parent's arriving.

When you make an assertion, you are claiming an event's occurrence. Alternatively: when you make an assertion, you are characterizing an event as occurring. E.g. to assert that the Lions are losing is to characterize the Lions as losing. Here the relevant event is *the Lions losing*.

When you form a belief, you are accepting an event's occurrence. Alternatively: when you form a belief, you believe an event to be occurring. (For past tense: you believe an event to have occurred; for future tense: you believe an event to occur at some future time.)

Events can be the subject and object of predication. An event can cause destruction, happen quickly, or confound opponents, etc. An event can be caused, preceded, scorned, etc.