

Are Propositions Fictional?

Mark Crimmins, April 2001

[This is very much not a finished paper. I saw Stephen Schiffer's introduction to the NYU seminar on the web, and I wanted to write up my reaction to the bit about me---because I'd like to address the issue that Stephen hoped I'd address in inviting me, because I'm indeed interested in it, and because....]

Pace Stephen Schiffer (*pace*, Stephen, *pace*!), I have never defended the idea that propositions are fictional entities. Not that Schiffer is far off about my actual (if so far privately held) views: I am fond of the view, which Stephen Yablo has urged recently (“Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake”, <http://www.mit.edu/~yablo/om.html>, and “A Paradox of Existence”, <http://www.mit.edu/~yablo/apex.html>), that apparent references to and quantifications over abstracta like propositions are in fact ontologically noncommittal (and Yablo does offer an interesting pretense story of how this might work; a great deal of my discussion will be influenced by Yablo’s work). Indeed I would extend the scope of part of Yablo's proposal perhaps even further than Yablo has done, because while I am not sure what ontologically committing oneself is, or if it is any one thing at all, I doubt that ordinary speakers ever do anything of the sort in their utterances (and not only when they seem to talk about abstract objects).

Schiffer worries as follows:

To Crimmins and other fictionalists I say that their position is not well motivated because they don't have the good reasons they think they have for doubting that propositions exist. If their worry is how to account for knowledge or reliable beliefs about propositions, then they should appreciate that given the right

conception of propositions, it's a conceptual truth which we know *a priori* that propositions exist.

I don't myself deny that propositions exist. And there may be a (not merely conceptual but) *trivial* truth expressed by 'propositions exist', given a certain way of understanding it. But there's another way of understanding of 'exist' (the one ontologists teach their students) in which its not completely obvious that it's equivalent to the sense of 'exist' that makes this use of 'propositions exist' trivial. And using that ontological notion of existence, I think it's reasonable for someone to think that while (pending the outcome---ha!---of philosophical debate) there may not be any propositions, nevertheless Galileo believed something about the Earth's motion. When an ordinary thinker is finally at the end of reflective inquiry about her past use of language, I very much doubt that she'll regard her utterance of 'Galileo believed something about the Earth's motion' as having expressed commitment to one side of the ontological debate about propositions. The worry is not that ordinary speakers would have false beliefs if they were ontologically committed to propositions, or that they lack the rational grounds to construct good arguments for being so committed, or that propositions are mysterious and epistemically inaccessible. It's rather that speakers don't (and won't, looking back, at the end of inquiry) regard the their ordinary claims as asserting answers to ontological questions.

So I like that aspect of Yablo's view: statements that appear on the surface to commit speakers to the existence of abstract objects don't really ontologically commit them. But I'm not sure that he is right in explaining being ontologically noncommittal in terms of pretend-existence. That's one way in which being noncommittal could happen: being

merely pretend-committal would account for it. But I worry that the notion of ontological commitment may be just a philosophers' construct (and not a player in the commonsense world), so I don't know how semantically interesting it is that people typically don't commit themselves ontologically. If pretend-commitment to existence is defined so as to require speakers to be pretend-ontologists, then I doubt that it makes sense to explain ordinary cases of being ontologically noncommittal in terms of it, unless the game is one of rational reconstruction or something like that.

Let me explain. If you're offering a fictionalist construal as a suggested replacement understanding of a discourse that you regard as having non-kosher commitments as it stands, you are proposing that the discourse *need not* have those commitments---it can be reconstrued that way, saving its point. If you're doing that, it's no objection that understanding the fictional commitments requires concepts that speakers don't yet have. But if you're claiming that the discourse as it stands does not have the problematic commitments, and you're offering a fictionalist explanation of how this is so, then part of the idea is that the problematic commitments are far from foreign: they are on the very face of the talk; the commitments are *as if* commitments, so they can hardly be deeply buried. Part of a semantic pretense hypothesis, as I understand the idea, is that the *straightforward* (or "literal") use of the sentence would carry the problematic commitments. This is just what I am not convinced of in the case of *ontological* commitment to abstract objects. Why should we take the straightforward, literal understanding of "there are propositions" to be the ontologically loaded one rather than another one? That's what I want to discuss here.

Let me contrast this with a fictionalist proposal that I *have* explored (and defended as worth further development, though I haven't insisted that it is correct; see "Hesperus and Phosphorus", *Philosophical Review* 1998, <http://www-csli.stanford.edu/~crimmins/HespPhos.pdf>). The semantic pretense account of opaque (or "notionally loaded", as I say) uses of propositional attitude ascriptions takes uses of thing-talk devices like proper names, quantification, identity and counting devices, and anaphora in these contexts to systematically do a different job from their standard, straightforward job of distinguishing among objects to talk about. What this different job is, I won't go into here. But part of what makes the account at least plausible (to me, anyway) is that it is extremely plausible that the role of straightforward, literal uses of these thing-talk devices *is* that of distinguishing among things to talk about. According to the account, in these utterances we use devices that have a certain literal job, but here they serve an expressive function that is not explained simply as their performing their literal job. Nevertheless, it is plausible that their serving this unusual expressive function is derivative on their literal job---it is their capacity to do the literal job that is exploited when we bend them to the additional use: their literal capacities are *operative*. So it's crucial to the plausibility, such as it is, of the semantic pretense account of attitude talk that the devices we use really are thing-talk devices; and that it is their thing-talking potential that we exploit in attitude talk.

Similarly, Kendall Walton and David Hills have offered fictionalist accounts of some metaphorical language (Walton, "Metaphor and Prop-Oriented Make-Believe," Hills,

“Aptness and Truth in Verbal Metaphor”). The plausibility of their accounts as applied to a particular utterance depends on the plausibility of an account of the literal meaning of the utterance, and the plausibility of the claim that that literal meaning is operative: it is being exploited in bending the expression to metaphorical expressive use. (This is hardly special to the fictionalist account: the plausibility that an utterance is metaphorical at all seems to depend on these factors.)

So if we want to explain on this pattern being ontologically noncommittal about propositions with a pretense account of proposition talk, we would be committed to at least two claims. First, that the literal understanding of proposition talk *is* ontologically committal. Second, that this ontologically committal reading of proposition talk is expressively exploited in our ordinary noncommittal use of it. So we’d have to defeat at least two competing hypotheses: that there is a literal reading of proposition talk that does not carry ontological commitment; and that there is a non-literal but ontologically noncommittal reading of proposition talk that is not derivative on a literal, ontologically committal reading. In fact I regard both of these competing hypotheses as live options. Suppose, as I think it might be, that there’s an ontologically noncommittal, but still literal use of existence-talk. Then, our talk as if about the existence of propositions might directly commit us to their existence, but not, as it were, to their being members of our official ontology. Or, alternatively, that talk might deploy that noncommittal meaning in a non-literal way, so that we’d not even be committing ourselves to the ontologically noncommittal type of existence for propositions. We’d only be making as if to say that propositions exist, and in only an ontologically unloaded sense of ‘exist’ at that.

Whether either of these possibilities is plausible depends on what it means for a use of thing talk, (whether it involve the predication of existence or rather something like quantification, anaphora, singular terms, counting devices, and identity) to be ontologically committal. So let's ask that question.

(There are of course distinctions to make about ontological commitment: you can be committed to there being a certain *category* of entities or stuff, and to there being particular instances. Maybe you'd rather say that only commitment to categories is ontological, commitment to instances being another sort of commitment. So there are two ways of being ontologically committed to a category, depending on whether you do it by being committed to one or more instances of the category existing. I hope you won't mind if I don't try to keep track of distinctions of this kind here.)

One possibility is that *all* thing talk is ontologically committal: its being thing talk is what makes for ontological commitment. This would take propositional thing (talk as if about propositions) to be as committal as talk about dogs and about electrons.

It is obviously wrong, though, about the commitments of speakers, because speakers can talk frivolously, they can play-act, and so on. We need to require for commitment that speakers are serious. So is being ontologically committal using thing talk seriously? No, because inexplicitly fictional talk can be serious:

(1) Three of Holmes's cousins were saved by his sleuthing.

Regarding this (considered as a description of the Holmes stories) as ontologically committal would be odd: the speaker is not committing herself to there being three cousins (in reality), so it seems wrong to take the speaker's commitments to include ontological ones about cousins based on what is an existence claim merely on the surface. Cousins, of course, are things we may be fairly comfortable having in our ontology, and so you might not really worry about accepting (1) as ontologically committal to cousins. But consider a story about ontologically more troublesome objects

(2) There once was a trope named Toby. The end.

and a report of the story in the same style is obviously noncommittal:

(3) Toby was a trope.

So it seems that merely as-if commitments to the existence of particular instances of categories are not ontologically committal. So talk of the style (1) or (3) is a problem for the view that seriously-used thing talk brings with it ontological commitment.

The obvious problem is that (1) and (3), while used seriously, aren't used *literally*. So we should say rather that thing talk is ontologically committal when it is meant literally and seriously. It's vague what's literal, but that's no problem if it's matchingly vague what's

committal. But what reason is there to think that the vagaries match up---that the categories of the seriously literal and of the ontologically committal coincide?

I'll sketch one obvious reason. Ontology is about what there is. When you seriously and literally claim that 'there is' something of a certain sort, you commit yourself to a view about what there is, because you are committed to the truth of what you say, and that requires that there really is something of that sort. Ontological facts are just truths about what there is, ontological beliefs are beliefs about what there is, and ontologically committal statements are claims about what there is, and these include all serious, literal uses of thing-talk.

But I am not satisfied by this. It assumes that all serious, literal thing talk is on a par in a certain way, and I'm not sure there's any good reason to believe this. To explain why, I will need to say more about what I take thing-talk to be, and about how the structure of thing-talk constrains its semantics.

Thing talk involves the use of singular terms, quantifiers, counting apparatus, identity terminology---stuff like that---according to certain familiar patterns. These include inferential patterns as well as syntactic ones. Call this the surface logical grammar of thing talk. I assume that thing talk is used *literally*, when the semantic functioning of that talk (the way its truth conditions are determined) gives it the surface logical grammar of thing talk, and its semantic functioning does not make the assignment of truth-conditions derivative and indirect in something like the way postulated by pretense accounts. Now,

there may be reasons to think that talk apparently about propositions does not have the full surface logical grammar of thing talk, but I will ignore this possibility. I want to show that the surface logical grammar of thing talk places only light constraints on its semantics, and to draw out the consequences for viewing it (the surface logical grammar of literal, serious talk) as the mark of ontological commitment.

Consider the really simple point that thing-talk can be used in a language (the language of arithmetic) to talk just about numbers. “Everything” is every number, all singular terms refer to numbers. A truth in this language:

(4) Nothing is not is the sum of something and one.

(But wait---I’m not the sum of something plus one! Does this mean Peter Unger was right?!) We have the surface grammar of thing-talk in a well-defined language, but true literal claims of non-existence don’t commit us to ontologically dispensing with, say, people. But maybe that’s not a big deal; the idea is that thing-talk grammar makes ontological commitment apparent; not that it makes ontological repudiations apparent. Still, this is a case in which talk that’s in a very surfacey way “about what there is” is not plausibly read as a straight ontological claim, and so it does undercut the simple motivation for the view that serious, literal thing talk is always committal (i.e., because it’s literally “about what there is”).

The language of arithmetic can be given content by stipulating that it's to be about the numbers---that this is the universe of discourse---and specifying how that's to be by fixing extensions: specifying which numbers the numerals stand for and which relations and functions on the numbers are meant by the relation and function symbols of the language; this is the usual way. It generates conditions for the truth of sentences of the language in terms of how the numbers really are. But that's not the only way to assign truth-conditions; indeed it's not the only way to assign truth conditions so that the very same sentences turn out true and false. You can permute the extensions, swapping one and two everywhere, or replace the numbers with the numerals, and so on. Or you can just say that the true sentences are the ones that would be true given any of the equivalent semantic stories of this kind. In that case, there is no universe of discourse and no extensions for terms and predicates stipulated in the metalanguage. Or say that the true sentences are those that would be true, supposing that there *were* numbers, if the numeral "0" stood for zero, and so on. Again, no universe or extensions are stipulated in the metalanguage. These ways of stipulating truth conditions for the sentences of the language are perfectly in order as stipulations; they do specify what's required for sentences to be true, but more important for my purposes, they preserve the surface logical character of thing talk in the language. This makes it a little clearer what I mean in distinguishing the surface logical grammar of thing talk from the at least prima facie stronger requirement that the talk semantically be talk about things: that (vagueness aside) its quantifiers range over a universe of discourse and its expressions have extensions.

The point is that the demands placed by the surface logical grammar of thing talk on the semantics for a language are pretty weak. Indeed, they can be satisfied twice over. Take the language used by Duane. Duane talks about “things” (something, everything, the same thing), and he also talks about “schmings” (someschming, everyschming, the schmame schming). He speaks what logicians call a two-sorted language; in his language the arguments of predicates take either thing-terms or schming-terms, but not both. He can’t understand a claim that a thing and a schming are the same thing or the schmame schming (such claims are not even well-formed, let alone true). The sentences of Duane’s language, I stipulate, have well-defined truth-conditions that are compatible with the logical character of thing talk (for instance, among the valid patterns of inference are versions of universal and existential instantiation and substitution of identicals). As we saw in the case of numbers, this needn’t require *stipulating* universes of discourse for the quantifiers and extensions for the terms and predicates. Of course it’s open to a philosopher to hold that it nevertheless provides them with universes and extensions.

Remember that we have on the table the idea that the criterion for an ontologically committing utterance is that it be a serious, literal use of thing talk. A necessary, though maybe not sufficient, condition for using thing talk is using talk with a certain surface logical grammar. Is it sufficient? Suppose that it is. The view of ontological commitment that results---call it the promiscuous view---is that ontological commitment just is seriously, literally using language with the surface logical grammar of thing-talk (this would be a view akin to one that I believe Crispin Wright has considered). Presumably (putting aside bizarre alternatives) it would go with the view that the

ontologically-loaded truths expressible in a language are just the truths that employ the surface logical grammar of thing-talk.

The promiscuous view is one way of answering the question what is needed for a use of language with the surface logical grammar of thing talk to be *literal* use of thing talk. If thing talk is defined by its surface logical grammar, then using it literally means using in such a way that it and grammatically related sentences have operative semantic properties (such as truth conditions) in virtue of which they stand in the inferential and other relations that characterize the surface logical grammar of thing talk.

One attraction of the promiscuous view, albeit a debatable one, is that it takes existence to have, so to speak, an insubstantial nature. Contrast the promiscuous view with, for instance, the view that to exist is to be an assemblage of matter. Against the latter view it might be argued not (or not only) that it is extensionally wrong about what exists, but that it is misplaced: it really ought not to be a view of what existence *is* but rather a view of what sorts of thing manage to achieve existence (one might make the same complaint about causal theories of reference: they are misplaced as accounts of what referring *is*; they ought to be accounts of how reference is or can be achieved). My point is that the promiscuous view at least doesn't make *that* mistake, and indeed it seems the most natural way not to make it. Ontology is about what there is; and it is hard to see what more content there might be to "what there is" than is determined by the surface logical grammar of thing talk. The logical character of thing talk is at least plausibly constitutive of its meaning, and so it is plausible that there is nothing more to *being* than what is

required for there to be a literally true statement with the surface logical character of an existence claim, and nothing more to ontological commitment than seriously, literally making such a claim.

If the promiscuous view is correct, a user of the language of arithmetic is ontologically committed even when its semantics are stipulated in the way that doesn't stipulate a universe or extensions. And Duane is ontologically committed in his talk about things and schmings, however the semantics for this talk is given.

The promiscuous view might seem to be recommended by its being the straightforward idea that all serious, literal talk that looks and acts like thing-talk be directly read ontologically. But it is not that idea. The view requires treating certain claims differently---notably claims with the surface logical character of universal quantifications and negated existential quantifications. Sentence (4) cannot be regarded as a straightforward expression of an ontologically-loaded claim that there is nothing that is not the sum of something and one, because that claim cannot be counted true by the view, since languages like English can formulate claims like:

(5) Crimmins is not the sum of something and one.

(6) It is not the case that nothing is not the some of something and one.

where both must be counted true and ontologically committal on the view. Similarly, we can't treat as straightforwardly ontological Duane's true claims:

(7) Everything is the same thing as something.

(8) Every schming is the schsame schming as someschming.

There are of course intuitive discomforts about the easy-come ontology of the promiscuous view. Suppose we add to our language the name “Bar” and the Predicate “Foo”. We can find stipulations that coherently assign truth conditions to sentences of the expanded language so that, without stipulating a thing for “Bar” to stand for or an extension for “Foo” the following come out necessarily true “Bar is Foo”, “There is just one Foo, namely Bar”, and so on. I won’t go into details, but the idea is that it’s really very easy to institute talk with the surface logical grammar of thing-talk, and there is intuitive discomfort to the ontological view that it’s that easy for there really to be things to talk about. There may also be concerns about how to identify “things” names for which are, or could have been, added in ways like this.

But I think the biggest problem with the promiscuous view of ontological commitment is not that it requires a promiscuous ontology. The biggest problem is that it makes so little sense of the philosophical debates about ontology. After all, it is a view about what constitutes *ontological commitment*. It gets its point from the philosophical discussion of ontology: the question it answers is not something like “when are statements literally true that expressions with the surface logical grammar of thing talk”, but rather something like “what is the attitude of ontological commitment that philosophers have been so worked up about all these years?” The promiscuous view offers a very odd answer to this

question: all it takes to ontologically commit yourself is to use a statement that has the surface grammar of thing talk, such that semantic stipulations (or conventions) deem it literally true. Certainly, people can have two very different conceptions of a single subject matter without realizing that they are conceptions of the same thing, and certainly philosophers can be very confused and make enormous mistakes. But I cannot imagine how we could be convinced that philosophers have been arguing so confusedly about exactly *that* rather than arguing less confusedly about something that makes more sense of the debates, and rather than being in the typically philosophical predicament of not making enough distinctions, mistakenly thinking that there's something specific to be arguing about in a certain conceptual neighborhood, when they have failed to secure a determinate subject matter. The big problem for the promiscuous view is its implausible semantic account of *philosophical discourse*. I regard this problem as fatal. There may well be a promiscuous concept of existence; it may even be the only concept of existence that figures in ordinary thing talk; it may even be true that the promiscuous answer is right about the ontological question of what there really is; but I find hopeless the idea that we should interpret ontological debates as debates over when the promiscuous concept applies.

Alternatives to the promiscuous view require of talk with the surface logical grammar of thing talk further conditions if it is to count as ontologically committal. This can involve one of two things. Either we tighten the requirement for talk *being* thing talk, so that more than the surface logical grammar is required (but we keep the idea that ontological commitment is just serious, literal use of thing talk), or we say thing talk is defined by

surface logical grammar, and ontological commitment requires more. This may sound like a trivial distinction, and it might be, but needn't be, because the former view might hold that the further conditions for committal talk are bundled into the literal meanings of our thing-talk devices, rather than treating thing talk to be what those devices do when the speaker is being, say, scrupulous in a certain way. But for my purposes, all that matters is that according to these views there is a substantive further condition for ontological commitment beyond serious, literal use of a sentence with the surface logical grammar of thing talk.

Here are some Quinean possibilities for the further condition (they are proposals inspired by Quine's writings; Quine's own views about this were complex and changed considerably; more from Quine soon):

- That the speaker regards the use of the surface logical grammar of thing talk in the statement not merely as correct but as expressively indispensable.
- That the speaker regards the statement as one that she would still accept at the end of inquiry.
- That the use expresses part of the speaker's Official Theory of the world.
- That the use is best translated into the language of our Official Theory with a sentence having the surface logical grammar of thing talk.
- That the use would at the end of inquiry be best translated into the language of our Official Theory with a sentence having the surface logical grammar of thing talk.

Each of these, I will say, generates a discriminating view about ontological commitment. The discriminating views do a far better job than the promiscuous view in making sense of the ontological debates in philosophy. They offer far more plausible accounts of *what* is being contemplated when philosophers recommend or warn against expanding our ontologies in various ways. The discriminating views also (to varying extents) make sense of the idea that ontological commitment is commitment about *what there really is*, as opposed to what it might be expressively convenient to say there is, and even what it is properly counted true in ordinary discourse to say there is. Also in their favor is that they cash this out (again, to varying extents) in terms ultimately of the logical grammar of thing talk---that they respect the idea that existence has an insubstantial nature. To be sure, more than the logical grammar is required, but the additional material has to do, plausibly enough, with concepts answering to the ‘*really*’ in ‘what there *really* is.’

One stark difference between the promiscuous view and the discriminating views is the extent to which they can plausibly find ontological commitment in ordinary talk. On the promiscuous view, ontological commitment can be commonly found in the discourse of ordinary people. People do use language with the surface logical grammar of thing talk seriously and (plausibly at least often) literally. The discriminating views, on the other hand, paint ontological commitment as requiring so much that it is very implausible to suppose that ordinary speakers ever reach the standard.

In this opinion, I am at least largely allied with Quine himself, who in “Things and Their Place in Theories” (1981), writes:

The common man's ontology is vague and untidy in two ways. It takes in many purported objects that are vaguely or inadequately defined. But also, what is more significant, it is vague in its scope; we cannot even tell in general which of these vague things to ascribe to a man's ontology at all, which things to count him as assuming. Should we regard grammar as decisive? Does every noun demand some array of denotata? Surely not; the nominalizing of verbs is often a mere stylistic variation. But where can we draw the line?

It is a wrong question; there is no line to draw. Bodies are assumed, yes; they are the things, first and foremost. Beyond them there is a succession of dwindling analogies . . .

My point is not that ordinary language is slipshod, slipshod though it be. We must recognize this grading off for what it is, and recognize that a fenced ontology is just not implicit in ordinary language. The idea of a boundary between being and nonbeing is a philosophical idea . . . Ontological concern is not a correction of a lay thought and practice; it is foreign to the lay culture, though an outgrowth of it.

The main thread of this is Quine's rejection of the sharpness of the notion of ontological commitment. But I think that's the least interesting thread. More interesting is the insight that ontological questions are simply something very different from what ordinary people are concerned with; I would add: concerned with when they are deciding what to believe, what to take to be true. Also important is what he seems to think he *has* rescued of ordinary ontology: "bodies" (physical objects, I guess) are assumed, other thing-ish talk bears variously strong analogy to talk about bodies. But it seems to me that he hasn't demonstrated anything more about our ordinary "commitment" to bodies than that we find it cognitively overwhelmingly natural to use thing-talk in that way. It might be, indeed, that it is more than natural, that it will survive the paring, unification, and refinement of serious science. Quine thinks it will, and so he includes bodies in the ontology of his canonically regimented official theory. Another philosopher or scientist might disagree about whether an ontology of bodies will so survive. But ordinary

speakers have no opinion on the question, and they certainly do not commit themselves to an answer when they talk about sticks and stones. So I don't think Quine is right if he thinks that ordinary language has even a vague *ontology*. He may not mean this; he may mean rather that we have a concept of 'thing' that has this vague character; applying certainly to objects and gradedly less certainly to events, places, states, properties, propositions, ways the world might have been, skills, brainstorm, and so on. I'm sure this is correct; and it might dispose people to certain ontological views when they begin to think about ontology. But it doesn't commit them to anything to do with ontology already.

I don't assume that one of the discriminating criteria for ontological commitment is correct. In fact, I strongly suspect that the right thing to say about ontological commitment is that (like '*de re* belief', and 'quale') it's a philosophical concept that has been used in a cluster of related ways, without there being a single correct analysis. Metaphysicians believe or assume that there is a way of construing thing talk that, for one thing, places at least *prima facie* greater demands on semantics than the light constraints provided by surface logical grammar, that, for another, makes the talk susceptible to a disciplined scrutiny that is foreign to ordinary use, and that, for a third, reflects and answers to systematic considerations of simplicity and unity of a kind similar to those that guide empirical science. More might be assumed, by all philosophers, or only by some. What I doubt is that these beliefs or assumptions single out some one phenomenon that ontological commitment must be. I am not going to offer anything more to support

this doubt here, however, since it's off our main track, and the deadline has passed, and I don't really know what to say anyway.

I expect the following response to the claim that ordinary thing talk, taken literally, is not ontologically committal. Even if we grant that people using ordinary thing talk do not commit themselves ontologically, because they are not committed to their talk meeting anything approaching the discriminating criteria, it does not follow that what they say, taken literally, is not so committed. And this not merely because they might not be speaking literally, but also because they might not be committed to the truth of what they say. Commitment to genuine truth, after all, might well be governed by something not unlike the discriminating criteria we have listed for ontological commitment---'end of science' sorts of thing---and it is far from clear that we ordinarily commit ourselves to anything like that. Perhaps the standard commitment of a speaker in making an assertion is not to the truth of what she says, but only to something weaker, which we might call its descriptive aptness (to get intuitions flowing, consider that one might hold that 'France is hexagonal' is false but descriptively apt given France's actual shape, and that one who asserts the sentence is committed assertively only to its condition of descriptive aptness being met, not the much stronger condition of truth). I think we *can* develop such a distinction between truth and descriptive aptness, but that it is no help, because it involves exactly the same divorce for truth that we have argued for in the case of ontological commitment, from the commitments of ordinary speakers speaking literally (and it is these latter commitments that are at issue in the debate whether ordinary, literal propositional thing talk is ontologically committed to propositions).

I have been trying to support the following idea: ontological commitment is a philosophers' concept that is best analyzed in a discriminating as opposed to promiscuous way, though it may have no one best analysis. In any case it is a philosophers' concept about which ordinary speakers express no commitments.

Back to propositions. I was arguing that it's plausible to use a certain fictionalist strategy---one that explains our propositional thing talk as only pretendedly ontologically committal---only if the straightforward, literal, ordinary understanding of thing talk *is* ontologically committal. But it's not, so that strategy doesn't work.

Recall the two other possibilities that I called competitors of this strategy. First, propositional thing talk might be straightforwardly literal even though it's ontologically noncommittal. That is, our language assigns truth conditions to the talk not indirectly through a fictional or metaphorical filter, but directly: the language taken literally has those truth conditions. Second, propositional thing talk might get its truth conditions indirectly, through a fictional or metaphorical filter, based on a literal reading of the talk that is not ontologically committal.

If the first strategy is right, then propositions are not linguistic fictions. If the second is right, though, then they still might be, even though ordinary talk taken literally is not ontologically committal. I am not going to explore the first strategy, not because I think it's incorrect, but because I think how it plays out in more detail is not directly relevant to

the issues of this paper; and anyway I think you at NYU are familiar with Schiffer's work on pleonasm, which provides one way to develop the idea. So I'm going to focus on the second strategy: propositional thing talk is non-literal, even though taken literally it is ontologically noncommittal.

This view might seem strange because if the literal talk is ontologically noncommittal anyway, what can using it non-literally achieve---pretended noncommittalness? Extra noncommittalness? What's right about this worry is that a non-literal use of thing talk would isolate it from some of its literal commitments. What's wrong about it is the assumption that if *ontological* commitments are absent from the literal talk anyway, there are none left to be shed by a figurative use. Not so: that the ordinary claim that there are propositions is ontologically noncommittal doesn't entail that it is true. If I'm right, the claim that there are in fact unicorns is ontologically noncommittal, too, and it is false.

So the view rests on the claim that there are commitments to a literal, serious use of a statement like 'There are propositions', which speakers do not in fact incur when they say things like 'Galileo believed something about the Earth's motion'.

What might these commitments be? One possibility is that the ordinary concept of a *thing*, the one that fuzzes out soon after physical objects, is built into the requirements for the literal use of ordinary thing talk. If so, we could explain our ignoring the fact that there aren't such *things* as propositions as our pretending that there are. This is a coherent view, but I don't know of any reason to believe it. There is of course the

morphological fact that ‘something’ is made from ‘some’ and ‘thing’, and there’s the fact that we do use the word ‘thing’ for propositions: ‘One thing Galileo believed was that the Earth moves’. But there is not even a faint echo of the object-centric notion of thing in this use; moreover, the object-centricity of the notion would be doing no work in the fictionalist view, since that is the aspect of thing-talk that the view takes to be pretended away. The main rival to the fictionalist view, of course, is that there is more than one sense of ‘thing’, and that a different one is in play here. We shouldn’t multiply senses without reason, but here we seem to have plenty of reason.

Other possibilities for commitments of literal thing talk that we might pretend away in applying it to propositions emerge from considering that, while an ordinary use of thing makes no ontological commitment, it might nonetheless, literally understood, be committed to some subset of the commitments that constitute ontological commitment. Ordinary thing-talk commitment might be something like an attenuated version of ontological commitment.

For instance, we might hold that propositional thing talk is, if it is to be taken literally, committed to there being (based on our conventions, or on our idiolectic competence) a coherent assignment of truth conditions to the talk. Consider Saul Kripke’s claim that the apparatus of propositions breaks down in characterizing certain beliefs (“A Puzzle About Belief”). One way of understanding that is as the claim that the rules that determine, if anything does, the truth conditions of propositional thing talk, are actually inconsistent. We *might*, then, take it that, literally speaking, there are no propositions, because the

propositional thing-talk rules are inconsistent. If so, then we *could* regard ordinary propositional thing talk as in error, but we wouldn't have to. We could instead hold that ordinary propositional thing talk statements aren't committed to quite so much as literal truth; and a pretense account can step in. I don't mean to defend the idea. I don't accept Kripke's reasoning, and if I did, I would still not be sure that the inconsistency of the rules entails that no literal truth conditions are ever fixed for propositional thing talk.

Another possibility, or cluster of possibilities, is that ordinary thing talk, literally understood, might be committed to there being answers to questions about identity, individuation, persistence, essence, and constitution of the things talked about. If ordinary thing talk taken literally *is* committed to some such thing, but an ordinary speaker is not so committed in a particular use of thing talk, then that use is not literal. In addressing questions whether such-and-such a commitment is required for something being literal thing talk; I suspect it will be of no help to canvas intuitions about whether talk lacking the commitment really deserves to be called literal thing-talk (I boldly conjecture that *philosophers will disagree about this*). But there may be strategies of argument that are better.

For example, consider Yablo's example of 'smarts', as in 'Ann has a lot of smarts'. At some level, suppose we agree, this statement makes as if to say that Ann has a lot of things of a certain sort, namely smarts, our talk about which is constituted by the rule that one's degree of intelligence corresponds to the number of smarts one has. Maybe this is a bad characterization of smarts-talk, since smarts seem like grits, a mass term that, as the

dictionary says, is “construed as plural” (I suppose there could be a pretense story of what that means, too); but it could have worked that way, so suppose it does. There is no provision in smarts talk for counting smarts, for distinguishing one smart from another, or for identifying a smart as one we have encountered before. One view would be that because of this, it cannot be right to see the talk as committing us to there being such things as smarts, and so it can’t be right to construe smarts talk as literal. Again, this is not ontology; we’re not, for instance, concerned about whether smarts will survive in scrupulous science when all the empirical evidence is in. It’s rather an argument that smarts talk doesn’t *even* commit us to the ordinary, ontologically noncommittal, but still literal, claim that there are smarts. And so a pretense account of smarts is attractive.

This argument seems plausible, but it’s not obviously inescapable. Someone might respond: sure there are, literally (but don’t put this in my ontology), smarts. Ann has a lot, I have fewer; so there are at least those smarts, Ann’s and mine. Some issues about them just don’t have answers (or truth-conditions for that matter): approximately how many does Ann have? About how many more does she have than I? Does she have mostly the same smarts she had yesterday? But some things are like that: poorly individuated, you might say.

Are some things like that? Accusing things of being poorly individuated seems a bit like, to use Russell’s phrase, calling the world muddle-headed [??? Is that right? (“Vagueness”)] . The trouble is that I don’t know how to turn that joke into an argument. Here, though, is an argument. Smarts talk *uses* words, such as “many”, and “fewer”, that

express *cardinality concepts*, and those words serve their expressive function in smarts talk *in virtue of* their expressing those cardinality concepts (the cardinality concepts are deployed; they are operative). But these cardinality concepts only have literal application when there are cardinalities; and smarts talk works despite there being no cardinalities (and despite this being common knowledge). So cardinality language must be used non-literally in smarts talk. Since there is no smarts talk other than talk sorting the cardinality of people's smarts, the apparent commitment of smarts talk to smarts is not meant literally. One might try to escape this argument by proposing to view the cardinality words as expressing different concepts (say, mass amount concepts) as they are used in smarts talk, but that would undercut the reason for regarding smarts talk as committed to things in the first place.

Anyway, that provides a model of one sort of argument that I think might have some hope of addressing issues about whether what looks on the surface like thing talk is literally so. But can such an argument help us with propositions?

Propositions, considered as creatures of ordinary propositional thing talk, are famously hard to count, identify, and distinguish, and so we might hope for an argument of the same kind. Our hopes might be enhanced by the considerations of the following sort:

- Counting: we say "I know more things about simulated woodgrain vinyl than you'll ever know", when surely we don't seriously take there to be cardinalities of the propositions we each know about simulated woodgrain vinyl.

- Identity: sometimes we count '2<3' as saying the same thing as '3>2', sometimes not. Two people who each believes himself to be in Rome sometimes are counted as believing the same thing, sometimes different things. But identity, taken literally, isn't up to us.

But I think that ultimately facts like these will not fund an adequately compelling argument for the fictionality of the existence commitments of ordinary propositional thing talk. Consider the analogy between propositions and places. There is a thing surface logical grammar to some of our talk about places, and yet they are hard to count and identify:

- Counting: we say "I have been in more places than you ever will," when surely we don't seriously take there to be cardinalities of the places we have been.
- Identity: sometimes we say that people in different parts of Rome are in the same place, sometimes not. Sometimes, if Kenny's still in the back seat, we say that he's still in the same place, even if we've driven to another city (and even though the Earth wheels through space).

Must we conclude that counting and identity concepts are used non-literally? I don't think so. There are at least two reasonable alternatives. One is to see this talk as depending on (no doubt vague) contextual restriction in which among all the places are relevant. There are places-within-cars, places which are cities, and so on, and sometimes we use 'place' meaning to talk about only a subclass of all the places. The other

alternative is to view the concept of a place not as 'eternal'---not as singling out once for all a class of things for us to talk about---but as a contextually flexible device for singling out different classes of things on different occasions. There is no great class of the places. Being a place is something that only makes sense in a context of having fixed upon a way of dividing up some phenomena in a place-like way (it's this latter notion, of dividing up phenomena in a place-like way, that is the guts of the concept of a place). I favor this latter alternative. [I should say more about why, but I've driven Adam Pautz, who has been enormously patient with me, to now use CAPITAL LETTERS in his pleas for my contribution.]

Analogous alternatives are available in the case of propositions. One is to see propositional thing talk, especially when it involves counting and identity, as depending on restricting attention to a subclass of the unmanageably complex and huge uberclass of propositions. Among all the true propositions about woodgrain, there are those that represent relevantly informative answers to relevantly distinct, relevantly salient questions about it (and it is to these that we restrict attention in counting). There are also propositions that vary as to how much cognitive perspective they build in; saying that two people who believe they're in Rome believe the same is to restrict attention to more perspectival propositions; saying that they don't is to restrict attention to less perspectival ones. Identity and cardinality aren't up to us, but contextual restriction is. The other alternative is to view the concept of a proposition as not eternal but flexible; there is no great class of the propositions. Being a proposition is something that only makes sense in a context of having fixed upon a way of dividing up some phenomena in a proposition-

like way. Again, I favor the latter alternative. Propositional thing talk is constrained by the concept of a proposition, but there is looseness and flexibility as to what's a correct scheme for using it to dice up the phenomena. And it's only when a scheme is fixed that counting and identifying should be expected to make sense.

Propositions and places are hard to count and to identify, I suggest, because there is no them there. We face puzzles about counting and identity when we consider things abstractly enough that we haven't done our bit in turning a blueprint for a category into an actual category. It's not the case, as it was with smarts, that the counting problems suggest that counting concepts can only be seen as used non-literally in propositional thing talk. So the smarts-style argument won't fly.

But the fictionalist has another shot. Consider the schemes that we contextually settle on in actual ordinary uses of propositional thing talk (according to the view lately sketched). Supposing the view is roughly correct, it is only *given* such a scheme that counting and identifying propositions should make sense. Granting that this may remove some counting worries about propositions, it won't remove them all. For instance: I am in San Francisco; that's something I believe. There, that was an ordinary use of thing talk in perfect order, so I must have settled contextually on a scheme. Well, on *that* scheme, does everyone who thinks she's in San Francisco believe the same thing? The fictionalist's point is that it is implausible to think that individuation schemes are singled out even in context, and so there's still plenty of room for the proposal that we often merely make as if to assume an individuation scheme.

This I grant. There's room for that proposal. But it's not obvious that it fills a crying need. We don't have with propositional thing talk, as we had with smarts, an argument that actual ordinary use of counting or identity concepts can only be understood non-literally. When we *do* use counting and identity concepts in propositional thing talk, it seems that we do settle enough about an individuation scheme to make literal sense of it. More cautiously, what we ordinarily settle is enough to make literal sense of our counting and identity talk, *supposing* that that sort of talk *can* make literal sense in the absence of a well worked-out individuation scheme. If it can, the fictionalist's help is not needed; if it can't fictionalism about propositions is at least plausible. Can it? I boldly conjecture that *philosophers will disagree about this*.

Loose ends:

[note that there's lots of territory between face-value commitment and rational reconstruction; conceptual analysis, etc.]

[forgot to reconstrue Duane as the ontologist who still speaks ordinary language]