

Lewis's Dilemma: Harmony and Propositional Structure

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1 Propositional harmony

Propositions naturally “pair up” with certain entities and not others. One familiar pairing relation holds between propositions and their truth conditions. It is an essential, and hence necessary, feature of the proposition that Mozart composes that it be *true* if and only if Mozart composes.

Here are some other, related, facts about propositions:

- Moreover, on some views propositions are *representational*.¹ On these views, the proposition that Mozart composes represents that Mozart composes, and doesn't represent that Strauss sings.
- Singular propositions stand in a further, particularly “direct”, relation to certain entities and not others. The truth conditions (etc.) of the singular proposition that Mozart composes essentially involve how things stand with Mozart. They do not essentially involve how things stand with Strauss.

The unifying theme is what we call *propositional harmony*. A proposition *harmonizes* with certain entities, and not with others.² These harmony facts stand in need of explanation. What is it about the proposition that Mozart composes that explains why it harmonizes with certain entities and not others?

- One constraint on an adequate explanation of the harmony facts traces back to [Lewis 1986](#). Lewis's constraint is broadly Humean: necessary connections between distinct, intrinsically-typed existences are unacceptable.³
- Us: one lesson of Lewis's constraint is that many (most?) contemporary theories in the metaphysics of propositions lack an acceptable explanation of propositional harmony. We also think the problems we'll be discussing arise even independently of Lewis's Humean proclivities.

¹For example: [Merricks 2015](#) and [Soames 2010](#).

²We intentionally leave open the metaphysical question of what these “entities” might ultimately be.

³[Lewis 1986](#), 179: “I ask: how can these connections be necessary? It seems to be one fact that somewhere within [a world], a [particular fact or situation obtains]; and an entirely independent fact that [that] world enters into a certain external relation with [certain propositions and not others]. What stops it from going the other way? Why can't anything coexist with anything here: any pattern of goings-on within [a] world, and any pattern of external relations of [a] world to various propositions?”

2 Lewis's Dilemma (LD)⁴

1. Propositional harmony is either an *internal* or an *external* relation.⁵
2. Suppose harmony is internal. Then the fact that entity *e* and proposition *p* harmonize is grounded in some (relevant) intrinsic feature *F* of *p*'s, together with the intrinsic nature of *e*.
3. Propositions as characterized by [Theory X] lack such any such (relevant) intrinsic *F*. (§3)
4. So harmony is an external relation [on Theory X]. (1-3)
5. External harmony is unacceptable.
6. So [Theory X] cannot provide an acceptable explanation of propositional harmony. (4, 5)

3 Theories of propositions

3.1 The Simple Theory⁶

- Propositions have no internal “structure”: they are abstract, mereological simples that (somehow) harmonize primitively and fundamentally.
- Unsurprisingly, the Simple Theory does not evade LD.

3.2 Set-like and set-theoretic propositions

3.2.1 Stalnaker propositions⁷

- Propositions are truth conditions (sets of worlds).
- But set-theoretic structure is insufficient to evade LD.

3.2.2 Structured propositions

- Russellian structure⁸: constituents are “ordinary” objects and properties; but constituents are not parts (Salmón p.c.).
- Fregean structure⁹: constituents are “senses” or “conceptual contents”; but constituents are not parts ([Frege 1923/1963](#)).
- Propositional constituents are insufficient to evade LD.

3.3 Harmony in virtue of overlap

⁴[Lewis 1986](#), 177–87; also [van Inwagen 1986](#) and [Jubien 1991](#).

⁵On Lewis's (1986) classification *R* is internal when *aRb* holds in virtue of the intrinsic natures of both *a* and *b*; otherwise *R* is external.

⁶[Merricks 2015](#); also [Bealer 1998](#), [van Inwagen 2004](#), and [Keller 2022](#).

⁷[Stalnaker 1978](#), 1984.

⁸[Russell 1903](#), 1904; [Salmón 1986](#).

⁹[Frege 1892/1960](#), 1918/1956.

- Lewis's *Parts of Classes* (Lewis 1991)
- Stalnaker revisited
- Structure revisited
 - Fregean mereologically structured propositions
 - Russellian mereologically structured propositions

Verdict: The most promising view, when confining ourselves to the internal horn of Lewis's Dilemma, is a Russellian view of structured propositions on which constituents are (mereological proper) parts.

4 External Harmony

4.1 Syntactically structured propositions (King 2007, 2009, 2019)

- (Conventional) interpretation of syntactic predication explains the harmony facts.
- Harmony is external; premise 5 in LD is false.

4.2 Propositions as theoretical posits (Richard 1990, 2022)

- Harmony is explained by the roles propositions are posited to play in semantic theorizing.
- Harmony is external.

4.3 Instrumentalism about structured propositions (Simchen 2022)

- Harmony is mediated via non-realistic (instrumental) representations of content.
- Harmony is external.

4.4 Against external harmony

Since it is only by being representational that anything becomes a candidate for being true or false, structured propositions of the familiar sort don't have truth conditions of their own. We can, of course, *treat* them as objects to be interpreted. But if this just means *endowing them with meaning* in the way we endow formulas of an uninterpreted language with meaning—by using a truth theory to assign them truth conditions—then our account of the representational content of propositions will be little better than the failed theories of the truth conditions of sentences that pose as theories of their meanings. (Soames 2010, 55-6; cf. Davidson 1967, 21-2)

P1. Externalist theories of propositions explain the harmony facts in terms of (schematic) biconditionals like these:

(H) p harmonizes with e iff p and e are appropriately externally related.

P2. Instances of (H) may be extensionally adequate. But an informative explanation of propositional harmony must additionally specify what it is about the entities invoked on the RHS of (H) which *explains why* biconditionals like (H) are true.

P3. Externalist theories cannot provide such an informative explanation.

C. Therefore, we should reject externalist theories of propositional harmony.

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