Philosophers have accused Locke of holding a view about propositions that simply conflates the formation of a propositional thought with the judgment that a proposition is true, and charged that this has obviously absurd consequences.\(^1\) Worse, this account appears not to be unique to Locke: it bears a striking resemblance to one found in both the *Port-Royal Logic* (the *Logic*, for short) and the *Port-Royal Grammar*. In the *Logic*, this account forms part of the backbone of the traditional logic expounded in the text. As a result, the account’s alleged faults seem to seriously threaten the coherence and value of the whole approach to logic. And to the extent that Locke’s core philosophical commitments, in particular his epistemology and philosophy of language, presuppose the framework of traditional logic, it threatens their coherence as well.

Indeed, a loose chronicle of the role of the proposition in modern philosophy runs as follows: Most of the important Early Moderns conflated the formation of a thought that has propositional content with endorsement of that content and simply failed to see the disastrous logical and epistemological implications of this conflation. Part of Frege’s genius, the story goes, was to see through this mess and clearly distinguish propositional content from judgment or assertoric force. P. T. Geach dramatically describes this conflation as a “monstrous and unholy union,” claiming that he finds in accounts like Locke’s

\[\text{a suggestion that “P” is predicated of S only if it is actually asserted, affirmed that S is P. A moment’s consideration ought to have shown that this will not do: “P” may be predicated of S in an if or a then clause, or in a clause of a disjunction, without the}\]


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The question I intend to address in this paper is whether this story is accurate or whether it is merely a myth, as Walter Ott has recently argued. I claim that the story does come close to the truth: Locke and Arnauld do indeed hold that to form a propositional thought is to accept or endorse that things are a certain way. Yet the claim that they simply conflate formation of a propositional thought with acceptance of the content of the thought is pure myth. I argue that what seems to be a simple confusion is actually a view about how we form propositions: the view purports to explain proposition formation in terms of judgment. I call this view the Judgment Account of proposition formation and the interpretation of Locke and the Port-Royalists that attributes the Judgment Account to them the Judgment Interpretation. I call the view that formation of a propositional content is distinct from assent to that content the Proto-Fregean Account and the interpretation that Locke and the Port-Royalists do draw such a distinction the Proto-Fregean Interpretation.

My aim in this paper is twofold. I first argue that the Judgment Interpretation is, indeed, the correct reading of Locke’s Essay and the Logic, and I then defend the Judgment Account against the charge that it has obviously absurd consequences.

The paper has five parts. The first part considers the kind of thing Locke and the Port-Royalists take propositions to be. In the second part, I distinguish several versions of the Proto-Fregean Interpretation of Locke and identify the considerations that, at least at first glance, seem to support this reading. In the third part, I offer three arguments against the Proto-Fregean Interpretation and in favor of the Judgment Interpretation as the preferable reading of the Essay and the Logic: the first argument concerns Locke’s and the Port-Royalists’ interest in the question of why all and only propositions have truth-values; the second concerns the relationship between propositions and assertion; and the third concerns the relationship between propositions and knowledge. In the fourth and fifth parts of the paper, I turn to the philosophical question of whether the Judgment Account is really as bad a view as it seems to be at first glance. In part four, I enumerate the problems that seem to face the Judgment Account. In the final part of the paper, I outline possible solutions to these problems. I conclude by suggesting that the Judgment Account of proposition formation has philosophical advantages that are easy for contemporary, post-Fregean philosophers to overlook.

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1See Ott, “Propositional Attitudes,” and Locke’s Philosophy of Language, 34–52.
2The words ‘judging’ and ‘judgment’ are delicate: sometimes we use the word ‘judgment’ simply for the formation of a propositional thought. More often we use ‘judgment’ to express a doxastic attitude; in this sense, judging is coming to believe. Locke, as we will see, reserves the term ‘judgment’ for a particular kind of doxastic attitude, namely the range of probabilistic beliefs that fall short of knowledge. To disambiguate these uses of ‘judgment,’ I use ‘judgment’ and ‘judge’ to mean some kind of doxastic attitude, though not always restricted to belief as opposed to knowledge; I use ‘proposition formation’ to indicate the former sense; and I specify when I intend ‘judgment’ to be taken in Locke’s restricted sense.
1.1 Propositions in the Essay

Locke claims that there are two kinds of propositions, mental and verbal, corresponding to two kinds of signs, ideas and words (Essay, IV.v.2, 574). Ideas are constituents of mental propositions and words are constituents of verbal ones. Thus, it should be clear at the outset that Locke uses the term ‘proposition’ to refer to a different kind of thing than what many contemporary philosophers take propositions to be. Contemporary philosophers typically treat propositions as non-linguistic, sharable, and mind-independent entities that serve as the primary bearers of truth-values, the objects of attitudes, and the meanings of sentences. Propositions are non-linguistic, since the English sentence ‘Snow is white’ and the German sentence ‘Schnee ist weiss’ have the same meaning in virtue of having the same proposition as their semantic content. They are mind-independent, since the proposition that snow is white has a truth-value regardless of whether anyone believes or denies that snow is white, or indeed whether there are minds at all. They are sharable, since, for instance, two people can be said to have the same belief in virtue of standing in the same kind of relation to the same proposition.

Verbal propositions, for Locke, have words as constituents, so they are linguistic entities, and seem to be sentences, rather than the semantic contents of sentences. However, since Locke holds that words are signs of ideas, we might plausibly think of mental propositions as the semantic contents of verbal propositions. Thus, two verbal propositions might be said to have the same meaning in virtue of expressing or signifying the same mental proposition. Similarly, the truth or falsity of a verbal proposition depends on the truth or falsity of the mental proposition expressed. Thus, Locke allows that the verbal proposition ‘There is no vacuum’ is demonstrable, and therefore true, if the speaker uses the word ‘body’ to signify the idea of bare extension. At the same time, the verbal proposition ‘There may be a vacuum’ is demonstrable, and therefore true, if the speaker uses the word ‘body’ to signify an idea that includes extension and solidity together (Essay, IV.vii.12–13, 60–64).

Locke claims that there are two mental acts by which we form mental propositions from ideas: combining or joining them to form an affirmative proposition and separating them to form a negative proposition (Essay, IV.v.5, 576). The act of combining signs is “affirming” and the act of separating them is “denying.” Analogously, words can be combined or separated to form verbal propositions, which can be affirmative or negative. Locke holds that the copula and negated copula are signs of the mental acts of affirming and denying (Essay, III.vii.1, 471). Thus, Lockean mental propositions are formed by the mind, by a mental act.

References to Locke’s Essay are to book, chapter, section, and page numbers from the Nidditch edition.

Locke claims that words immediately signify ideas (Essay, III.ii.2, 405). Whether ideas mediately signify things is a matter of some interpretative controversy; see Kretzmann, “The Main Thesis of Locke’s Semantic Theory”; Ashworth, “Do Words Signify Ideas or Things?”; and Ott, Locke’s Philosophy of Language, 7–33.
This is confirmed by Locke’s claim that a proposition is the “joining or separating of Signs” (Essay, IV.v.1, 574). As we will see below, it is crucial, for Locke, that mental propositions are mind-dependent in the following sense: a mental proposition has a truth-value only in virtue of one’s performing a mental act of affirmation or denial. Thus, I will argue that Locke’s account implies that it is not the case that the proposition that snow is white would have a truth-value even if there were no minds.

1.2 Propositions in the Logic

In the Port-Royal Logic, Arnauld and Nicole do not clearly distinguish two kinds of propositions, mental and verbal, but they sometimes claim that propositions have ideas as constituents and sometimes claim that propositions have words as constituents. For example, they write, “Since our purpose here is to explain various remarks that have been made about judgments, and since judgments are propositions composed of different parts, we should begin by explaining these parts, which are primarily nouns, pronouns, and verbs” (Logic, 73).6 If propositions have nouns, pronouns, and verbs as parts, it seems that they are linguistic entities, like sentences. But a few pages later, the Logic describes proposition formation as follows:

After conceiving things by our ideas, we compare these ideas and, finding that some belong together [convenant] and others do not, we unite [liaison] or separate [délions] them. This is called affirming [affirmer] or denying [nier], and in general judging [juger]. This judgment is also called a proposition, and it is easy to see that it must have two terms. One term, of which one affirms or denies something, is called the subject; the other term, which is affirmed or denied, is called the attribute or Praedicatum. It is not enough to conceive these two terms, but the mind must connect or separate them [mais il faut que l’esprit les lie ou les separe]. As we have already said, this action of the mind is indicated [marquée] in discourse by the verb ‘is,’ either by itself when we make an affirmation, or with a negative particle in a denial. (Logique, 144–45 / Logic, 82)

In both passages propositions are identified with judgments, but here judging is described as uniting or separating ideas, not words. The authors of the Logic claim that words signify “what takes place in the mind” (Logic, 74). Moreover, the Logic explicitly claims that every proposition must have at least three parts—a subject term, a predicate term, and an act of affirmation or denial—even though some sentences have fewer words, sometimes even a single word. Thus, we should treat ‘veni, vidi, vici’ as three propositions, each of which has a subject, attribute, and an act of affirmation (Logic, 83). Sentences like this reveal that the surface form of the sentence can diverge from the logical form of the proposition. Every proposition has a subject, attribute, and an affirmation or denial, even if some sentences do not have individual words signifying each of these parts.

Locke’s account of proposition formation owes a good deal to accounts like the one in the Logic. Locke owned two of the five editions of the Logic: the fourth edition in French and a Latin translation of the third edition.8 Other logic text-

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6 Parenthetical citations to the Port-Royal Logic include page numbers from Buroker’s translation and, where relevant, page numbers from the fifth edition published in 1683.


8 Harrison and Laslett, Library.
books included in Locke’s library contain similar accounts of propositions, but the similarities between the Port-Royal Logic and Locke’s account of propositions remain particularly striking.9 The most important similarity, I will argue below, is the fundamental concern with the question of why propositions, and only propositions, have truth-values and the common answer given to this question, which is that propositions have truth-values because they are formed by acts of affirming or denying.10 But there are other important similarities. First, both the Logic and the Essay hold that propositions are formed by acts of affirming or denying and describe these acts as ways of uniting or separating ideas or words.11 Both works claim that the copula and negated copula signify the act of affirming or denying, or the combining or separating of the ideas or words in the proposition. The Logic claims that the copula is the only true or pure verb, while Locke discusses only the copula and negated copula and says nothing specifically about other verbs.12 Finally, the Logic claims that only verbs in the indicative mood signify affirmation and denial, while Locke claims specifically that ‘is’ and ‘is not’ signify acts of affirmation and denial (Essay, III.vii.1–2, 471–72; Logic, 78–82).13

Despite these striking similarities, one might suspect that they tend to obscure deeper and more important philosophical differences between their views. In particular, if mental propositions have ideas as constituents, then disagreements between Locke and Arnauld over the nature of ideas would lead to corresponding

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9Logic textbooks owned by Locke include the following: Sanderson, Logicæ Artis Compendium (Locke owned an edition published in 1615); Du Trieu, Manuductio ad Logicam (1620); Clauberg, Logica vetae et nova (1658); Creilus, Isagoge logica (1584); and Wallis, Institutio logicae (Locke’s edition dates from 1687). The account of propositions in John Wallis’s Institutio logicae is closest to that found in the Logic and Essay; however, the late date of the edition in Locke’s library suggests it may not have been used as a source for the Essay (Harrison and Laslett, Library). However, Locke and Wallis were personally acquainted, making it possible that he was exposed to Wallis’s work in logic prior to 1687; see Woolhouse, Locke, 117.

10A number of other logic texts that Locke owned contain this view, or something close to it. Robert Sanderson claims that propositions are signs of truth and falsity (Logicæ Artis Compendium, 48). Fortunatus Creilus claims that propositions [oratio enunciativa] are true or false and affirm or deny something of something else (Isagoge logica, 115–17). Particularly striking is Wallis’s claim that defining a proposition as an indicative speech [orationem indicativam] signifies truth or falsity fails to explain adequately the nature of a proposition (Institutio logicae, 85). Instead, he suggests that a proposition is true or false because it asserts (affirms or denies) something and that truth or falsity is a consequence of the nature of the proposition.

11Wallis also claims this (Institutio logicae, 84). Philippe Du Trieu defines a proposition [propositio sive enuntiatio] as a speech [oratio] that affirms or denies something of something else (Manuductio ad Logicam, 2).

12Creilus claims that the copula is not a necessary part of a proposition (Isagoge logica, 122). Sanderson and Creilus argue that both nouns and verbs are categorematic terms, which signify things all by themselves, and that verbs are distinguished from nouns because they additionally indicate tense (Logicæ Artis Compendium, 42; Isagoge logica, 114). The Logic criticizes this kind of account of verbs (Logic, 80).

13Creilus and Wallis claim that verbal propositions must be in the indicative mood (Isagoge logica, 115; Institutio logicae, 85–86). Wallis goes on to remark that the sentences geometers call “problematæ” should use infinitives or imperatives. The Logic’s discussion of verbs appears in a chapter that first appears in the fifth edition, which is not listed among the books in Locke’s library. The chapter is taken verbatim from the Port-Royal Grammar, but this work is also not listed among the books in Locke’s library. Thus, it is possible that these similarities between the Essay and the Logic are owing to some other source. Nevertheless, the account of propositions in the Essay is at least as close to the Logic as to any of the other logic textbooks discussed above. See Logic, xxxvii; and Harrison and Laslett, Library.
disagreements over the nature of mental propositions. This might seem to pose a substantial interpretative problem, since commentators have argued for a range of interpretations of Locke’s views about the nature of ideas. I will not attempt to settle any of the controversial questions about Locke’s views about the ontology or intentionality of ideas in this paper. Instead, I submit that none of these potential disagreements between Locke and Arnauld bars them from offering a common explanation for the fact that propositions are the fundamental bearers of truth-values. Both Locke and Arnauld hold that propositions have truth-values in virtue of the performance of mental acts of affirmation and denial, and these mental acts are ways of judging or coming to believe something.

Let me end this section by noting an important terminological difference between the Essay and the Logic. Arnauld and Nicole use ‘judge’ as a general term that covers both the acts of affirmation and denial. Locke, however, reserves the term ‘judge’ specifically for probable belief that falls short of knowledge. Thus, for Locke, there are two kinds of doxastic attitudes: knowledge and judgment. Locke refrains from using ‘judge’ to refer to the acts of affirmation or denial in general.

2. THE PROTO-FREGEAN INTERPRETATION

Given the prima facie implausibility of claiming that thinking that \( p \) is or involves judging that \( p \) is true, it might seem that even a modicum of charity should lead us to read Locke and Arnauld as holding some sort of Proto-Fregean view, if such a reading is at all supported by the texts. Indeed, Walter Ott claims just this. Ott argues that we need to carefully distinguish Locke’s and the Port-Royalists’ talk of ‘affirmation’ and ‘denial’ (and the Logic’s use of ‘judge’) from language used to express various doxastic attitudes or assertoric force, like ‘assent,’ ‘believe,’ ‘doubt,’ and (in Locke’s case) ‘judge.’

Affirming and denying are what Ott calls “subpropositional acts,” which take subpropositional parts as objects, whereas assent, belief, and doubt are propositional attitudes, which take whole propositions as objects. These subpropositional acts are mental acts that unify the ideas composing a proposition. Affirming is a way of combining ideas that results in an affirmative proposition, while denying is a way of separating ideas that results in a negative proposition. Doxastic attitudes or acts, which, according to Ott’s view, take propositions as objects, are distinct from the subpropositional acts that result in the formation of a unified proposition.

While Ott claims that Locke distinguishes between subpropositional acts and propositional attitudes, he finds evidence of two different accounts of propositional attitudes in the Essay. According to the first, propositional attitudes are “second-order acts” that take propositions as their objects. On this view, once one forms a

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14To identify these points of potential disagreement between Locke and Arnauld, the best place to start is Arnauld’s controversy with Malebranche over the nature of ideas and Locke’s views about that controversy. There is ample evidence of Locke’s familiarity with the debate between Arnauld and Malebranche, though it is unlikely that his own sympathies fall squarely with either camp. See Harrison and Laslett, Library; and Allen, “Locke and the Nature of Ideas,” 244, for works relevant to the debate owned by Locke.

15Ott, Locke’s Philosophy of Language, 45–46, and “Propositional Attitudes,” 554–57.

16It is particularly mysterious, on this view, how the claim that denying is a way of separating ideas helps explain what unifies the ideas in a negative proposition; see Buroker, “Arnauld on Judging and the Will,” 9.
propositions, one can then form some attitude toward it, by doubting, believing, or supposing it.17 According to the second, propositional attitudes are not distinct second-order acts at all, but different ways in which one conceives a proposition. On this view, affirming and denying are subpropositional acts that result in a unified proposition, while propositional attitudes are different ways of conceiving the whole proposition.

Lex Newman claims to find a different version of the Proto-Fregean Account in Locke’s Essay. He proposes that Locke distinguishes three things: (1) “the justifying apprehension,” for example, in cases of knowledge, the perception of the agreement or disagreement of ideas; (2) the true proposition, that is, the agreement or disagreement between ideas itself; and (3) the mind’s assenting to the proposition.18 On this version of the Proto-Fregean Account, one assents to a proposition on the basis of a justifying apprehension, but the assent and the justifying apprehension are distinct, and the proposition is not formed—does not come into existence—either in virtue of the justifying apprehension or the act of assent. Thus, Newman treats the proposition as the agreement or disagreement of ideas, and so something waiting to be grasped or perceived, not something to be formed by the mind.19

Three different kinds of evidence can be marshaled in support of the Proto-Fregean Interpretation in general. The first, and most important, kind of evidence is the charge that the Judgment Account is obviously absurd and the charitable principle that we ought not saddle Locke and Arnauld with such a view if there is a reading of the texts that avoids doing so. The final section of the paper will argue that the Judgment Account is not absurd, after all, and so the alleged absurdity of the Judgment Account does not support the Proto-Fregean Interpretation.

Second, there are many passages in the Essay where Locke uses language that strongly suggests that there can be doxastic attitudes that take propositions as objects; this is apparently incompatible with his holding that forming a proposition involves judging that the proposition is true. In particular, the Essay is scattered with claims about the circumstances in which we do, can, or should assent to propositions. For example, in the argument against innate principles, Locke considers whether “ready assent, given to a Proposition upon first hearing, and understanding the Terms, be a certain mark of an innate Principle?” (Essay, I.i.18, 57). And he claims that “though a Child quickly assent to this Proposition, That an Apple is not Fire; when, by familiar Acquaintance, he has got the Ideas of those two different things distinctly imprinted on his Mind . . . yet, it will be some years after, perhaps, before the same Child will assent to this Proposition, That it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be” (Essay, I.ii.23, 61).20 Passages like these suggest that Locke as-

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17 Ott, Locke’s Philosophy of Language, 48.
19 In comments on an earlier draft of this paper given at the 2011 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Newman argues for a different interpretation, according to which Locke holds that propositions are formed by mental acts of judging, but judgment does not always involve assent or any doxastic attitude. This view is much closer to Ott’s proposal that propositional attitudes be understood as different ways of judging or forming propositions.
sumes that we can entertain propositions without having any particular doxastic attitude; otherwise, assenting to a proposition would be redundant.21

However, Locke’s definition of ‘assent’ in fact confirms that the Judgment Interpretation is compatible with Locke’s talk of assenting to propositions, and thus this kind of evidence does not support the Proto-Fregean Interpretation over the Judgment Interpretation. After explaining the difference between knowledge and judgment, Locke defines ‘assent’ as follows: “This Faculty of the Mind, when it is exercised immediately about Things, is called Judgment: When about Truths delivered in Words, is most commonly called Assent or Dissent: Which being the most usual way, wherein the Mind has occasion to employ this Faculty, I shall under these Terms treat of it, as least liable in our Language to Equivocation” (Essay, IV.xiv.3, 653). Thus, Locke claims that assent involves verbal propositions in the same way that judgment involves mental propositions. When Locke speaks of assenting to propositions, he means verbal propositions, and he has in mind cases where a verbal proposition is proposed and one can then assent or dissent. According to the Judgment Interpretation, assenting to an affirmative verbal proposition is a matter of judging that the ideas signified by the subject and predicate agree; assenting to a negative verbal proposition is a matter of judging that the ideas signified by the subject and predicate disagree. This is confirmed by Locke’s insistence that one cannot assent to a verbal proposition unless one has the requisite ideas.22

One might object on behalf of the Proto-Fregean Interpretation that Locke does not always use ‘assent’ to refer to a linguistic analogue of judgment, since he also speaks of assenting to propositions that are clearly knowable. For example, in his discussion of innate knowledge, Locke discusses assent to intuitive propositions.23 Thus, it seems that we can sometimes assent to intuitive propositions. Although these uses of ‘assent’ depart from Locke’s official definition, Locke still has in mind assent to verbal propositions, though in this case propositions whose mental counterparts are known and not merely judged. Again, Locke’s point is that, in such cases, having the ideas that are signified by the words in the proposition is a prerequisite to assenting to the verbal proposition, though assent in this case would correspond to perceiving an agreement or disagreement of ideas. Thus, Locke’s talk of assenting to propositions only seems to support the Proto-Fregean Interpretation and pose a problem for the Judgment Interpretation if one fails to distinguish between verbal and mental propositions—language and thought.

21Maria van der Schaar argues, largely on the basis of passages like these, that Ott’s interpretation, or something very close to it, is correct as an account of the Essay, but wrong as an account of the Logic. See Van der Schaar, “Locke and Arnauld on Judgment and Proposition,” 340.

22Locke claims “you will in vain endeavour to make any Child assent to a Proposition made up of such general Terms [for which he has no corresponding ideas]: But as soon as ever he has got those Ideas, and learn’d their Names, he forwardly closes with the one, as well as the other of the forementioned Propositions, and with both for the same reason; (viz.) because he finds the Ideas he has in his Mind, to agree or disagree, according as the Words standing for them, are affirmed, or denied one of another in the Proposition. But if Propositions be brought to him in Words, which stand for Ideas he has not yet in his Mind; to such Propositions, however evidently true or false in themselves, he affords neither assent nor dissent, but is ignorant. For Words being but empty sounds, any farther than they are signs of our Ideas, we cannot but assent to them, as they correspond to those Ideas we have, but no farther than that” (Essay, I.i.23, 61).

23Thus, the two “forementioned Propositions” in the passage quoted in the previous note are ‘That an Apple is not Fire’ and ‘That it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be’ (Essay, I.i.23, 61).
Turning to the third kind of evidence, Locke’s doxastic involuntarism seems to be incompatible with the judgment account. Locke clearly holds that much of our knowledge and belief is involuntary.\textsuperscript{24} But, surely, we have the power to think whatever thoughts we like, though we do not have the power to form whatever doxastic attitudes we like. This seems to show that affirming and denying are volitional acts of combining ideas, and thus cannot be identified with or explained in terms of any doxastic attitude.\textsuperscript{25} I will argue that the Judgment Account is indeed compatible with doxastic involuntarism, but I will only be in a position to do so after defending the Judgment Account against the charge of absurdity.

My aim in the remainder of the paper is twofold: First, I will argue that the Judgment Interpretation is clearly the preferable interpretation of both the Logic and the Essay. Second, I will try to show that the Judgment Account has the resources to deal with the philosophical problems facing it. Thus, not even a great deal of charity should lead us to attribute the Proto-Fregean Account to Locke or the Port-Royalists.

3. Problems for the Proto-Fregean Interpretation

Let us turn then to the obstacles facing a Proto-Fregean Interpretation of Locke and Arnauld. This section is divided into three parts. In the first, I examine in more depth Locke’s and the Port-Royalists’ interest in propositions as bearers of truth-values. In the second, I consider how the account of proposition formation hangs together with Locke’s claims about the purpose and nature of language. In the third, I explore the epistemological implications of the account of proposition formation. In each case, there is significant evidence that the Judgment Interpretation and not the Proto-Fregean Interpretation provides the better reading of the texts.

3.1 Propositions and truth-values

In the Essay, propositions play two important roles. First, propositions are importantly connected to knowledge and judgment, in Locke’s restricted sense. Propositions are either the objects of knowledge and judgment, as the Proto-Fregean Account would have it, or knowing and judging consist in forming propositions, as the Judgment Account would have it. Thus, the account of proposition formation is connected to one of the fundamental questions of the Essay, namely the “Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge” (Essay, I.i.2, 43).

Relatedly, mental propositions, for Locke, are the fundamental bearers of truth-values. Thus, Locke describes judgment and knowledge as “two Faculties, conversant about Truth and Falshood” (Essay, IV.xiv.4, 653).\textsuperscript{26} This suggests, quite reasonably, that the things that can be known or judged are those that have truth-
values. Thus, Locke is concerned to explain why propositions, and only propositions, have truth-values.

It is natural that Locke’s most extensive discussion of propositions occurs in the chapter “Of Truth in General.” Locke’s explicit concern in the chapter is to “carefully examine wherein [truth] consists; and so acquaint ourselves with the Nature of it, as to observe how the Mind distinguishes it from Falsehood” (Essay, IV.v.1, 574). Locke immediately goes on to define ‘truth’ and ‘proposition’ as follows: “Truth then seems to me, in the proper import of the Word, to signify nothing but the joining or separating of Signs, as the Things signified by them do agree or disagree one with another. The joining or separating of signs here meant is what by another name, we call a Proposition. So that Truth properly belongs only to Propositions” (Essay, IV.v.2, 574). The view that mental propositions are the fundamental bearers of truth-values is connected to two epistemological projects that are at the heart of the Essay: first, explaining the nature and extent of knowledge, and, second, explaining how our judgment (in Locke’s sense), opinions, and assent “are, or ought to be regulated” (Essay, IV.xvi.1, 657).

There is clear textual evidence that Locke and the Port-Royalists are interested in the question of what kinds of things have truth-values and, in particular, whether only propositions have truth-values. In the Logic, the account of proposition formation is said to “resolve a famous issue, namely whether falsity can exist only in propositions, or whether it is also found in ideas and simple terms” (Logic, 91). The Logic claims, on the one hand, “there can be falsity only relative to [par rapport à] the human mind or to some other mind subject to error, that falsely judges that a thing is what it is not” (Logique, 161/Logic, 92). On the other hand, complex ideas and terms can be false, in a sense, “if there is some judgment in the complex term, or some affirmation, either explicit or implicit [virtuelle]” (Logique, 162/Logic, 92). Thus, the Logic claims that it is in this sense that the complex term ‘Gassendi, who is the most astute of philosophers’ is false in the verbal proposition ‘Gassendi, who is the most astute of philosophers, believes that there is a void in nature’ (Logic, 93).

In “Of True and False Ideas,” Locke gives a similar answer to the question.27 He claims that ideas can be called false in virtue of a false affirmation, and he considers several kinds of false affirmation that might be made. At the beginning of the chapter, Locke claims that when an idea is appropriately called false, there is a “secret or tacit Proposition, which is the Foundation of that Denomination” (Essay, II.xxxii.1, 384). This is because, he continues, “our Ideas are not capable any of them of being false, till the Mind passes some Judgment on them; that is, affirms or denies something of them” (Essay, II.xxxii.3, 385).

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27This question interests Locke from the earliest drafts of the Essay, though the answer he gives changes. In the very first section of Draft A of the Essay, Locke claims that the “first affirmation or negation of our minds” is our “collecting many simple Ideas for the making one Idea of some sensible material or as we call it substantial object & these affirmations are grounded upon the repeated exercise of our senses about that object” (Draft A, §1, 5–6). The claim that forming complex ideas of substances involves an affirmation suggests that they can be true or false. In Draft B, Locke seems to express reservations about this view; see Draft B, §§63, 166–67.
The Judgment Interpretation and the Proto-Fregean Interpretation must interpret this last passage in substantially different ways, and, as a result, must understand Locke’s claim about what makes it appropriate to call some ideas false very differently. According to the Judgment Interpretation, Locke claims that it is only in virtue of false judgments that our ideas can be appropriately called false. According to the Proto-Fregean Interpretation, Locke is merely claiming that it is in virtue of false propositions that our ideas can be appropriately called false. This is because, if we take ‘affirm’ and ‘deny’ here to refer to subpropositional acts, then ‘Judgment’ too must refer to a subpropositional act. Considered on its own, this reading of the passage is consistent, if somewhat unnatural. However, if we consider the passage in the larger context of “Of True and False Ideas,” the Judgment Interpretation reading is clearly preferable.

Locke begins the chapter, as we have just seen, by claiming that ideas are only appropriately called false in virtue of a false judgment, or a secret or tacit proposition or supposition. (He uses all three terms.) He then lists three kinds of false tacit supposition that are commonly made. These are the following: first, when one supposes that one uses a word to signify the same idea that someone else uses the word to signify; second, when one supposes that a fantastical idea conforms to something really existing; and third, when one supposes that an idea represents the real constitution or essence of some thing. However, by the end of the chapter, Locke claims not that it is in virtue of a false proposition or supposition that an idea is appropriately called false, but in virtue of one’s making a certain kind of mistake. He then lists four kinds of mistake that frequently make it appropriate to call an idea false. Three of the four kinds of mistake are parallel to the three kinds of false supposition, and the fourth is judging that an inadequate idea is adequate (Essay, II.xxxii.21–24, 392).

The Proto-Fregean Interpretation cannot adequately account for the shift from the claim that it is in virtue of a false, tacit proposition that an idea can appropriately be called false to the claim that it is in virtue of a mistake that an idea can appropriately be called false. There is an obvious gap between these claims, and if the Proto-Fregean Interpretation were right, Locke would fail to bridge the gap. Forming a propositional thought that is false, but toward which one has no attitude at all, is not a mistake. If the Proto-Fregean Interpretation were right, we should expect Locke either to acknowledge that some ideas may be appropriately called false simply in virtue of a false proposition toward which one has no attitude (or, at least, no particular attitude) or to somehow acknowledge and bridge the gap between the claims that it is a false proposition that makes it appropriate to call an idea false and that it is a mistake that makes it appropriate to call an idea false.

The Judgment Interpretation, on the other hand, offers a straightforward account of the shift. According to the Judgment Interpretation, Locke claims that it is a false, tacit proposition that makes it appropriate to call an idea false.

Note that the Proto-Fregean Interpretation must either claim that ‘judgment’ is here used by Locke in a non-standard sense, to describe a subpropositional act, or that ‘affirm,’ ‘deny,’ and ‘proposition’ are used by Locke in non-standard senses, to describe doxastic attitudes. According to the Judgment Interpretation, judging, in Locke’s restricted sense, is a kind of affirming or denying, and so none of Locke’s terminology is used non-standardly.
But forming a false, tacit proposition involves making a mistaken judgment. This is because, according to the Judgment Interpretation, forming the proposition involves judging, in the doxastic sense.

The same problem arises with the Proto-Fregean Interpretation’s reading of the *Logic*. The *Logic* claims that there can be falsity only with respect to minds that are capable of error. The possibility of error explains why propositions are false and ideas are not. But forming a false proposition to which one has no doxastic attitude is not an error. Arnauld’s view seems to be that the possibility of error comes with the possibility of judging falsely, where judging is understood as involving a doxastic attitude. Only the Judgment Interpretation can account for the claim that false judgments explain why complex terms or ideas can be appropriately called false.

This is connected to a deeper problem with the Proto-Fregean Account. The Proto-Fregean Account, I submit, does not adequately explain why propositions have truth-values, while the Judgment Account does. Both Locke and Arnauld suggest that the fact that propositions have truth-values and mere ideas do not is a result of the fact that propositions can be erroneous or mistaken and mere ideas cannot be. But we have already seen that mere propositions, to which one has no doxastic attitude, do not seem to be any more susceptible to error than mere ideas. At the very least, explaining how we form propositions in terms of the acts of affirming and denying, in Ott’s subpropositional sense, does not seem to explain why propositions are susceptible to error in a way that mere ideas are not.

To see this, let us think a bit more about Locke’s claim that affirming and denying are ways of combining or separating ideas that result in, respectively, affirmative and negative propositions. As Ott recognizes, Locke says very little about what these acts consist in. We are simply told that affirming is a way of combining ideas that results in an affirmative proposition and denying is a way of separating ideas that results in a negative proposition. But, we might ask, what is the difference between forming a complex idea that is not true or false, like the idea of a red ball, and forming the mental proposition that the ball is red, which is true or false? After all, both are the result of combining the ideas of red and of a ball.

In contrast, I submit that the Judgment Account identifies a relevant difference between forming a mental proposition and forming a complex idea. If we take ‘affirmation’ and ‘denial’ in their doxastic senses, then we can read Locke and the Port-Royalists as holding that mental propositions are true or false because forming a mental proposition involves forming a doxastic attitude, and such attitudes are susceptible to error.

We might nevertheless wonder how to reconcile the claim that affirming and denying are doxastic acts with Locke’s tendency to describe them as acts of combining and separating ideas. We can understand why affirming should be called a way of combining ideas and denying a way of separating them if we think about Locke’s account of relations. Affirming, I propose, is a way of combining ideas because it is taking ideas to stand in some relation. Taking ideas to stand in some relation is, in effect, a way of connecting or combining them. Similarly, denying is a way of separating ideas because it is taking them not to stand in some relation. Thus, when I affirm that gold is fixed, I take the ideas of gold and of fixedness to stand in some relation, for example, coexistence in the same subject, thereby
combining them (Essay, IV.i.6, 527). When a child denies that an apple is fire, she takes the ideas of an apple and of fire not to stand in the relation of identity, and thereby separates them.

Of course, there is a difference between two ideas in fact standing in some relation and one’s taking them to stand in that relation, and Locke’s view is that taking ideas to stand in some relation is required for there to be a proposition with a truth-value. This explains why mental propositions are mind-dependent: a proposition’s having a truth-value depends on someone’s doxastic attitude.

This is confirmed by one of Locke’s replies to John Norris in his Remarks Upon Some of Mr. Norris’s Books. Norris argues that truth “consists in a certain mutual respect or habitude of simple essences one to another” and that such relations are eternal and immutable. He goes on to use this account of truth to argue for the Malebranchian doctrine that we see all things in God. Locke’s response implies that truth is not eternal, claiming, “If no proposition should be made, there would be no truth nor falsehood; though the same relations still subsisting between the same ideas, is a foundation of the immutability of truth in the same propositions, whenever made.” In other words, truth and falsity depend not only on the relations between ideas—which may be immutable—but on the formation of a proposition, that is, on the acts of affirming and denying. Notice that this is clearly incompatible with Newman’s version of the Proto-Fregean Interpretation, which treats propositions as relations between ideas that are grasped by the mind, rather than treating them as formed by mental acts.

3.2 Propositions and Assertion

A second problem for the Proto-Fregean Interpretation arises from a tension between it and Locke’s claim that one of the primary aims of language is to communicate our ideas to others. Indeed, one of the most important and controversial claims of Locke’s philosophy of language is the claim that words primarily and immediately signify only ideas. Thus, on the face of it, Locke’s view seems to be that language serves to communicate our ideas to others because a speaker’s words signify her ideas. Locke emphasizes the importance of a speaker’s being able to use articulate sounds as “Signs of internal Conceptions” and “to make them stand as marks for the Ideas within his own Mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the Thoughts of Men’s Minds be conveyed from one to another” (Essay, III.i.2, 402).

However, language must do more than merely signify the train of ideas that a speaker happens to have: it is as important that we communicate our attitudes, doxastic and non-doxastic, to others. Locke recognizes this when he claims that “Words are looked on as the great Conduits of Truth and Knowledge” and that “Speech [is] the great Bond that holds Society together, and the common Conduit, whereby the Improvements of Knowledge are conveyed from one Man, and one Generation, to another” (Essay, IV.x.10, 578; Essay, III.xi.1, 509). Language,

Norris, Treatises upon several subjects, 121.
Locke, Remarks, 327.
I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for calling these passages to my attention.
of course, must be a conduit for our judgments, in Locke’s sense, as well as for knowledge.

The problem for the Proto-Fregean Interpretation is that it implies that Locke offers an account of how we succeed in communicating mere propositional thoughts, but that he has nothing to say about how we communicate our doxastic attitudes. Locke holds that most words signify ideas, but some words, namely particles, signify “the connexion that the Mind gives to Ideas, or Propositions, one with another” (Essay, III.vii.1, 471). Locke goes on to claim that “Is, and Is not, are the general Marks of the Mind, affirming or denying.” Of course, according to the Proto-Fregean Interpretation, ‘is’ and ‘is not’ signify the subpropositional acts of affirming or denying; they do not signify any propositional attitude. If the Proto-Fregean Interpretation is right, Locke provides a straightforward explanation for how sentences signify mental propositions: in the sentence ‘The earth is round,’ the word ‘earth’ signifies the idea of the earth, the word ‘round’ signifies the idea of being round, and ‘is’ signifies the act of affirming, in the subpropositional sense, or combining the idea of roundness with the idea of the earth. But then how would Locke, on this reading, go on to explain how we communicate doxastic attitudes, like the judgment that the earth is round? According to the Proto-Fregean Interpretation, Locke is silent on this question, and yet it is right at the heart of his account of language.

According to the Judgment Interpretation, on the other hand, Locke does explain why uttering a sentence communicates a judgment. It is because the verb signifies the act of affirmation (and the negated verb signifies the act of denial), and affirmation and denial are kinds of judgments. Thus, the Judgment Interpretation squares better with Locke’s claim that the purpose of language is to communicate our ideas than the Proto-Fregean Interpretation does.

If we turn to the Logic, we can find evidence of a similar account of the communication of our doxastic attitudes. The Logic argues that the phrase ‘I maintain’ in ‘I maintain that the earth is round’ expresses the same act of affirmation as ‘is’ in ‘the earth is round’:

When I say, for example, ‘I maintain that the earth is round,’ [je soutiens que la terre est ronde] ‘I maintain’ is only a subordinate proposition that must be part of something in the principal proposition. Yet it is obvious that it is part of neither the subject nor the attribute. For it changes nothing at all in them, and they would be conceived in exactly the same way if I simply said, ‘the earth is round.’ And so this affects only the affirmation which is expressed in two ways, one in the usual way by the verb ‘is’: ‘the earth is round’; the other more explicitly by the verb ‘I maintain.’ (Logique, 167/ Logic, 95)

Yet, according to the Proto-Fregean Interpretation, ‘is’ expresses an act of affirmation only in the subpropositional sense; it does not express any propositional

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32One might defend the Proto-Fregean Interpretation here by proposing that Locke holds that one communicates doxastic attitudes by using verbs that explicitly signify propositional attitudes. Thus one can assert, “I believe that the earth is round” and thereby communicate that one believes that the earth is round. The trouble with this proposal is that it is clearly possible to communicate that one believes that the earth is round by asserting, “The earth is round.” Moreover, we ordinarily communicate a judgment that \( p \) by asserting \( p \), rather than asserting ”I believe that \( p \)” or ”I judge that \( p \).” If the Proto-Fregean Interpretation is right, Locke fails to explain why this is the case.
attitude. But it is clearly implausible to hold that ‘I maintain’ expresses affirmation only in the subpropositional sense! The most plausible conclusion is that both ‘is’ and ‘I maintain’ in these sentences express affirmation in the doxastic sense, and this is why asserting either sentence serves to communicate one’s judgment that the earth is round.\textsuperscript{33}

3.3 Propositions and Knowledge

In this section, I argue that Locke’s commitment to the Judgment Account is of a piece with several of his general epistemological commitments. In contrast, the Proto-Fregean Interpretation has unwelcome consequences for the interpretation of Locke’s epistemology.

Consider Locke’s definition of ‘mental proposition,’ “wherein the Ideas in our Understandings are without the use of Words put together, or separated by the Mind, perceiving, or judging of their Agreement, or Disagreement” (\textit{Essay}, IV.v.5, 575). According to the Judgment Interpretation, perceiving and judging of the agreement or disagreement of ideas are two ways of affirming or denying. Thus affirming and denying are general kinds of acts that include cases where one perceives an agreement or disagreement between ideas (knowledge) and cases where one presumes an agreement or disagreement between ideas (judgment).\textsuperscript{34} The Proto-Fregean Interpretation cannot make adequate sense of this definition. According to Ott, Locke uses ‘judging’ in this definition in a different sense than the official one, here referring to the subpropositional acts of affirming and denying.\textsuperscript{35} But then is ‘perceiving’ in this case also used to refer to a subpropositional act that does not result in knowledge? This would make Locke’s definition highly misleading, since phrases like ‘perceiving or judging the agreement or disagreement between ideas’ typically describe knowledge and judgment, in the doxastic sense. And what would be the difference between subpropositional judging and subpropositional perceiving? On the other hand, if perceiving an agreement or disagreement between ideas \textit{does} amount to knowing, the Proto-Fregean Interpretation must read the definition in a way that implies that, in cases of knowledge, we form a proposition only because we perceive the agreement or disagreement of ideas, and thus that we form a propositional thought only \textit{because} we know that the proposition is true.

Thus, according to the Proto-Fregean Interpretation, the definition suggests that, at least in cases of knowledge, we form mental propositions because we know them. But if affirming and denying are distinct from perceiving the agreement or disagreement of ideas, is it possible to perceive an agreement and yet refrain from affirming or denying anything? This would be to know something and yet not form any mental proposition. Even if we can adequately answer this question, the sug-

\textsuperscript{33}See Van der Schaar, “Locke and Arnauld on Judgment and Proposition,” 334–35, for a similar argument based on a different passage in the \textit{Logic}.

\textsuperscript{34}Locke defines ‘knowledge’ as “\textit{the perception of the connexion and agreement, or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our Ideas}” (\textit{Essay}, IV.i.1, 525). Judgment is “\textit{the putting Ideas together, or separating them from one another in the Mind, when their certain Agreement or Disagreement is not perceived, but \textit{presumed} to be so}” (\textit{Essay}, IV.xiv.4, 653).

\textsuperscript{35}Ott, \textit{Locke’s Philosophy of Language}, 49.
gestion that we form mental propositions because we know things threatens the distinction Ott claims to find between propositional attitudes and subpropositional acts, which he uses to justify the distinction between assenting and affirming. If knowing and judging are attitudes toward propositions, it is problematic to be committed to the view that one forms a proposition because one already has a propositional attitude toward the proposition to be formed.16

A slightly different problem faces Newman's distinction between what he calls the "justifying apprehension" and the act of assenting to the justified proposition. On Newman’s view, perceiving an agreement between ideas is distinct from assenting to any proposition, though it may justify one's assent. In the case of knowledge, Newman claims that one first perceives an agreement between ideas, and then, in a distinct act, assents to the correlative proposition. This means that knowledge for Locke consists merely in the perception of agreement between ideas and so assenting, in the sense of forming a doxastic attitude, is not a necessary condition on knowing a proposition. Recognizing this, Newman claims that Locke's theory of knowledge is one according to which knowledge is justified truth, not justified true belief: as he puts it, "[B]eing in the right sort of doxastic state is in no way constitutive of knowledge."37 Nevertheless, Newman suggests that this has only minor significance, since once we perceive an agreement between ideas, and therefore know a proposition, we are generally compelled to assent to it.

I have two objections to this view. First, this proposal requires that we can somehow understand what it is to perceive an agreement between ideas without forming any doxastic attitude. But what is it to perceive an agreement between ideas but not have any doxastic attitude? Second, it makes Locke's claim that it is impossible for us to withhold assent when we perceive an agreement between ideas a brute, unexplained fact. Why does perceiving an agreement between ideas cause a distinct act of assent? On Newman’s view, Locke provides no answer. According to the Judgment Account, there is a straightforward answer: perceiving an agreement between ideas just is forming a kind of doxastic attitude.

In general, the Judgment Account fits nicely with Locke’s basic epistemological commitments. For example, Locke’s claim that knowledge consists in perceiving a relation between ideas makes sense if knowledge is always knowledge of propositions and forming a proposition is taking two ideas to stand in (or not to stand in) some relation. Knowing, or perceiving such a relation, is one way of affirming or denying, or in general forming a proposition. Similarly, judging is presumption

16Ott seems to recognize something akin to this problem when he charges that Locke’s account of proposition formation falls prey to a subtle, but vicious, circularity (Locke’s Philosophy of Language, 41). Ott claims that in attempting to explain how the mind forms propositional contents, Locke presupposes the very sort of propositional content he is supposed to explain. Ott holds that Locke claims that affirmation is the act one typically performs when one takes ideas to agree and, conversely, denial is the act one typically performs when one takes ideas to disagree. But this is to characterize affirmation and denial in terms of the kinds of doxastic attitudes they are responses to. But since Ott holds that doxastic attitudes are propositional attitudes, they take propositions as objects. Thus, Ott claims that Locke’s account is circular, since he has explained how we form a proposition in a way that presupposes propositional content. Yet it seems to me that Ott fails to appreciate the epistemological ramifications of this alleged circularity: specifically, that it makes proposition formation a response to having a doxastic attitude.

such a relation, which is another way of affirming or denying, or in general forming a proposition.

4. PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS WITH THE JUDGMENT ACCOUNT

While the textual considerations in the previous suggestion may support the Judgment Interpretation, the single most important consideration in favor of the Proto-Fregean Interpretation is simply the allegation that the Judgment Account is obviously false. Indeed, a multitude of problems seem to arise from the claim that forming a mental proposition is judging or coming to believe that the proposition formed is true. Geach identifies a few of the more dramatic problems facing this view, but a fuller discussion of the alleged problems reveals just what dire straits the Judgment Account seems to be in.

1. The Problem of Mere Conception: It is alleged that the account makes it impossible to merely conceive a proposition without judging the proposition to be true. If mere conception is impossible, it seems that we cannot simply wonder whether some proposition is true, without forming any commitment to its truth or falsity.

2. The Problem of Inquiry: If forming a propositional thought involves judging it to be true, then we cannot think of inquiry as guided by particular propositions whose veracity we are trying to ascertain, since to form the proposition is already to hold that it is true.\footnote{See Ayers, \textit{Locke}, 1:84.}

3. The Problem of Other Attitudes: If every proposition is a judgment, how can one explain other propositional attitudes, like hoping, desiring, and supposing? If forming the mental proposition \( p \) involves judging that \( p \), does it follow that when one hopes or desires that \( p \), one already holds that one’s desires are fulfilled? If this sounds too good to be true, it is: the account also seems to entail that when one fears that \( p \), one holds that what one fears has come to pass. Supposing is similarly problematic.

4. The Problem of Attitude Ascriptions: The account appears unable to explain how we can ascribe propositional attitudes to others without ourselves judging the content of the attitude ascribed. For example, if I judge that John believes that childhood vaccines cause autism, do I thereby also judge that childhood vaccines cause autism?

5. The Problem of Communication: If John asserts that childhood vaccines cause autism, does my understanding his assertion require my forming the proposition that childhood vaccines cause autism? But then this would seem to entail that I too believe that childhood vaccines cause autism, and that I cannot consistently wonder whether childhood vaccines cause autism or deny that they do.

6. The Problem of Complex Propositions: The account seems unable to explain how complex propositions are formed. It is obvious that one can judge that a disjunction is true without judging that either disjunct is true. However, if each disjunct is a proposition, then it seems that the Judgment Account is committed to holding that in forming each disjunct one judges it to be true. Similarly, a conditional can be judged to be true even if neither the antecedent nor the consequent is judged to be true, but, according to the Judgment Account, forming the conditional
seems to require that one judge both the antecedent and the consequent to be true. Worse yet, in a counterfactual conditional, the antecedent is acknowledged to be false, but the account suggests that, in forming the thought of the antecedent, one judges it to be true. This problem also makes various forms of reasoning impossible. For example, if one cannot account for how one can judge a disjunction without judging either disjunct, one cannot explain how it is possible to infer something by disjunctive syllogism. Similarly, if one cannot account for how one can judge a conditional without judging the antecedent and consequent, inferring something by modus tollens involves contradicting oneself twice. (And modus ponens is a waste of time.)

7. The Problem of Modal Judgments: If one judges that it is possible that \( p \), does one thereby also judge that \( \neg p \)? Worse, if one judges that it is impossible that \( p \), does one—absurdly—also judge that \( p \)?

5. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

So far, it seems that there is considerable textual basis for attributing the Judgment Account to Locke and the Port-Royalists, despite the many problems apparently facing this view. In the final section of the paper, I will consider some strategies Locke and the Port-Royalists could employ to avoid the apparently disastrous consequences of the Judgment Account. I hope to show that Locke and the Port-Royalists could reasonably hold that employing some combination of these strategies could solve the problems.

Solution 1. Degrees of Judgment: Several of the alleged problems with the Judgment Account stem from the fact that it seems to entail the impossibility of merely conceiving a proposition without forming any attitude toward it. Owen endorses the Judgment Interpretation, but offers an interpretation of Locke that attempts to show how something at least close to mere conception is possible.\(^{39}\)

In Book IV, Chapters 14–16, Locke claims that there are degrees of probabilistic judgment. Allowing degrees of judgment solves the problem of inquiry, since Locke may claim that the goal of inquiry is to attain knowledge, or at least a high degree of probability, where knowledge cannot be had. Thus, we can treat inquiry as guided by probabilistic judgments that fall short of knowledge. Moreover, Owen claims that this can be used to give an account of something close to mere conception. His proposal is that, on Locke’s view, when one’s evidence is completely balanced, or when one lacks evidence altogether, one should form a completely neutral or equipollent judgment, where one judges, in effect, that something is as likely true as false.

Forming such a neutral judgment is not the same as merely conceiving something, but it might serve as a suitable substitute in some cases. However, Owen’s strategy cannot solve the problem of complex propositions, as he acknowledges, or any of the other problems. For example, it will not do to say that one has balanced evidence for the antecedent of every conditional one judges, or for every belief one ascribes to someone else.

Solution 2. Limit the Uses of Propositions: In contemporary philosophy, propositions serve several philosophical purposes. Besides being the fundamental bearers of truth-values, propositions are also the objects of attitudes like believing, fearing, desiring, and so on. Yet Locke and Arnauld treat propositions more narrowly than this; they do not explicitly treat other attitudes, especially non-doxastic ones, as taking propositions as objects. For example, the authors of the Logic claim that only verbs in the indicative mood signify judgments; verbs in other moods express other attitudes.

What, though, should they claim about propositional-attitude ascriptions that are in the indicative mood? In the sentence, ‘Joe hopes that Mary will arrive soon,’ is the complement ‘Mary will arrive soon’ a verbal proposition and does it signify a mental proposition? I think that Locke and the Port-Royalists could safely answer no. Locke discusses attitudes that contemporary philosophers often treat as propositional attitudes, including desire, joy, hope, fear and anger, in “Of Modes of Pleasure and Pain” and classifies them as passions. Locke claims that ideas cause these passions. For example, desire is “the uneasiness a Man finds in himself upon the absence of any thing, whose present enjoyment carries the Idea of Delight with it” (Essay, ii.xx.6, 230). Locke does not mention propositions at all in this chapter, and there is nothing that suggests he thinks of the passions as relations to propositions, rather than relations or, perhaps, responses to ideas. Thus, we should resist simply assuming that Locke takes these to be propositional attitudes, in the absence of textual evidence for this. If this is Locke’s and the Port-Royalists’ position, they might be forced to resist the tempting thought that someone who believes that Mary will arrive soon, someone who hopes that Mary will arrive soon, and someone who fears that Mary will arrive soon bear different attitudes to the same object, the proposition expressed by the phrase ‘Mary will arrive soon.’ But this might well be a reasonable move, given the difficulties it helps the Judgment Account avoid.

There is, of course, still the somewhat awkward grammatical fact that the complement ‘Mary will arrive soon’ certainly seems to be a verbal proposition, in part because it contains an indicative verb. Moreover, the Logic seems to hold that all indicative verbs signify affirmation and Locke claims that ‘is’ and ‘is not’ signify affirmation and denial, respectively. Yet it would be a mistake to take the correlation between grammatical mood and the function of the verb too strictly, since the indicative mood has different uses in different languages. The fact that the indicative mood is used differently in English than it is in French or Latin implies that it cannot be the case in all languages that verbs in the indicative mood signify affirmation and denial in all of their uses. For example, French uses the subjunctive mood in many cases where English uses the indicative, including belief ascriptions and many other attitude ascriptions. As long as we keep this in mind, there is no problem in holding that some attitude verbs that take (apparently) propositional complements are not actually propositional attitudes.

Solution 3. Propositions and Ideas of Propositions: A similar move might be made to solve the problem of ascribing judgments or beliefs to others, as in judging, for example, that John believes that childhood vaccines cause autism. Here we might claim that the phrase ‘childhood vaccines cause autism’ functions to signify the
idea of the judgment or proposition, rather than the proposition itself. In other words, someone who judges that John believes that vaccines cause autism affirms of John the complex attribute of believing that vaccines cause autism; the idea of this attribute will include an idea of the proposition or judgment that vaccines cause autism, but not any actual act of affirmation, nor any actual proposition or judgment.

There is evidence that the Port-Royalists distinguish between the act of affirmation and the idea of this act. First, they distinguish between the way that verbs signify affirmation and the way the noun ‘affirmation’ itself signifies affirmation. They write, “[S]everal nouns . . . also signify affirmation, such as affirmans, affirmatio, because they signify affirmation only insofar as it has become an object of thought by mental reflection. Hence they do not indicate that the people who use these words are making an affirmation, but only that they conceive of an affirmation” (Logic, 79). Taken merely as a grammatical distinction, this does not solve our problem, but the distinction between an act of affirmation and the conception of an affirmation does solve the problem, if we allow that this distinction does not map perfectly onto the distinction between verbs and other parts of speech. Similarly, supposing might be treated as involving consideration of the idea of a proposition, rather than forming a proposition or judgment.

Although Locke does not explicitly make use of the distinction between the act of affirming and the idea of that act, his account of ideas of reflection implies that he recognizes this distinction. Ideas of reflection are those we get when the mind “turns its view inward upon it self, and observes its own Actions about those Ideas it has” (Essay, II.vi.1, 127). Thus, Locke too distinguishes between performing a mental act and having the idea of that act.

Moreover, both Locke and the Port-Royalists implicitly distinguish between performing an act of affirmation or denial and conceiving of someone else’s act of affirmation or denial. In his discussion of particles, Locke emphasizes that particles are used to signify acts of the speaker’s mind. Thus, Locke claims that an important part of speaking properly is the speaker’s ability to “express well such methodical and rational Thoughts” and this requires “he must have words to shew what Connexion, Restriction, Distinction, Opposition, Emphasis, etc. he gives to each respective part of his Discourse” (Essay, III.vii.4, 427). Successful communication involves not just the use of particles to signify various kinds of acts of the mind; it requires the use of particles to signify that the speaker performs mental acts of those kinds. But this suggests that the audience, in interpreting the speaker’s utterances, conceives of the speaker’s acts of mind. In other words, when John asserts, “Childhood vaccines cause autism,” a hearer does not just form a conception of affirmation, she conceives of John’s affirmation. This helps explain both how communication works according to the Judgment Account and how belief ascriptions are possible. When John asserts that childhood vaccines cause autism, the hearer need not form the same mental proposition, that is, affirm of childhood vaccines that they cause autism, but typically affirms that John affirms that childhood vaccines cause autism. But affirming that John affirms something is not the same as affirming it oneself.

The Logic also distinguishes between affirming something oneself and affirming that someone else affirms something. The Logic claims that the proposition, ‘All philosophers assure us that heavy things fall to the earth of their own accord’
(Tous les Philosophes nous asseurent que les choses pesantes tombent d’elles-mêmes en bas) is ambiguous (Logique, 167/Logic, 95). The first way of understanding the sentence is to take the clause, ‘heavy things fall to the earth of their own accord,’ to be the main clause, the verb ‘fall’ to express the act of affirmation, and the phrase ‘all philosophers assure us’ to modify the main clause, buttressing, as it were, the act of affirmation with an appeal to authority. (“Heavy things fall to the earth of their own accord, as all philosophers assure us.”) The second way of understanding the sentence is as a report of “an opinion of philosophers” which the speaker does not intend to endorse. In this case, “the first part would be the principal proposition and the last part would be only part of the attribute. For [the speaker] would be affirming not that heavy things fall of their own accord, but only that all philosophers assure us of it” (Logic, 95). We can take the phrase ‘heavy things fall to the earth of their own accord’ to be part of the attribute if we take the speaker to affirm that others, in this case philosophers, affirm something. In this case, ‘fall’ does not signify an actual act of affirmation, but merely the idea of philosophers’ affirmation.

We can get a better grasp on how this solution might be fleshed out by considering an example in more detail. Suppose I judge that John believes that childhood vaccines cause autism. In forming this mental proposition, I affirm of John, the subject, the complex attribute of believing that childhood vaccines cause autism. I do this by combining, in the way characteristic of affirming, the complex idea of believing that childhood vaccines cause autism and the idea of John. Here, however, the complex idea of believing that childhood vaccines cause autism will include the idea of affirming of childhood vaccines that they cause autism. But I can have this idea without myself affirming that childhood vaccines cause autism.

One might object that forming such an idea would be an excessively difficult or subtle task, but I think Locke’s view allows room for shortcuts. Locke holds that we frequently use the idea of a word to stand in for the idea signified by the word. Thus, people “set their Thoughts more on Words than Things” (Essay, III.ii.7, 408). Thus, if I am thinking about autism, I will often use the idea of the word ‘autism’ to stand in for the complex idea of autism. Similarly, if I am thinking about John’s beliefs, I might use the idea of the verbal proposition to stand in for the idea of the mental proposition. (I might, for example, imagine John asserting, “Childhood vaccines cause autism.”) This allows us to circumvent the subtle task of forming the complex idea of the mental proposition that childhood vaccines cause autism.

This strategy can be extended to solve the problem of complex propositions, by claiming that forming a conditional or disjunctive mental proposition is affirming that a certain kind of relation holds between two propositions. For example, the Logic treats conditionals as true if and only if the inference from the antecedent to the consequent is valid (Logic, 99–100). This suggests that if one judges something of the form ‘if $p$ then $q$’ one judges that a kind of inferential relation holds between $p$ and $q$. Affirming this, however, might be described as holding in mind the idea of the proposition expressed by $p$ and the idea of the proposition expressed by $q$ and affirming that there is some relation between them.

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40See also Essay, IV.v.1, 579.
Similarly, the *Logic* claims that disjunctions are true if there is a “necessary opposition between the parts [or disjuncts]” (*Logic*, 99). But then one can analyze the judgment that something of the form ‘*p* or *q*’ is true in terms of one’s having the idea of the proposition expressed by *p* and the idea of the proposition expressed by *q* and affirming that there is a necessary opposition between these ideas. In short, logically complex propositions should be thought of as having the ideas of propositions as parts, rather than the propositions themselves.

One might worry that this solution implies that a verbal proposition, like ‘childhood vaccines cause autism,’ signifies a mental proposition on its own, but when the same phrase is embedded in a more complex construction, such as a belief ascription, disjunction, or conditional, it signifies the idea of a proposition rather than a proposition. Can one systematically explain why the same phrase sometimes signifies a mental proposition and sometimes signifies the idea of a mental proposition? I think that one can. Let us start with the case of belief ascriptions. In our example, the belief that childhood vaccines cause autism is affirmed of John, and one affirms something of something else by combining ideas of those things. Thus, the phrase ‘childhood vaccines cause autism’ signifies an idea of a proposition, in this context, because it is part of the predicate. In general, whenever a phrase that would signify a mental proposition on its own is part of the subject or predicate of a complex verbal proposition, it signifies the idea of the mental proposition.

The explanation is more difficult in the case of logically complex propositions, like disjunctions and conditionals. Consider the complex verbal proposition, ‘The ball is red or the block is yellow.’ If this signifies a mental proposition, which is formed by an act of affirmation or denial, what word signifies that act? There is no basis for choosing one occurrence of ‘is’ rather than the other, and it is odd to think that both occurrences of ‘is’ signify a single act of affirmation. This is indeed a problem, but not an insurmountable one. The *Logic* explicitly holds that in many sentences the verb that signifies affirmation also signifies other things, such as the action performed or the time. Similarly, Locke’s exclusive focus on the copula and negated copula might be taken as an implicit recognition that most verbs signify affirmation in addition to something else. Consideration of logically complex mental propositions may force them to hold that, in some cases, no single word signifies the act of affirmation. Nevertheless, in the sentence, ‘The ball is red or the block is yellow,’ the phrases ‘the ball is red,’ ‘the block is yellow,’ and ‘or’ jointly signify one’s affirming that a certain logical relation holds between the disjoined propositions. The proponent of the Judgment Account can claim that it is a fact about the meaning of ‘or’ that when verbal propositions are embedded in disjunctions they signify ideas of propositions. And, of course, one can make analogous claims about other sentential connectives, including ‘if . . . then.’

Finally, distinguishing propositions from ideas of propositions allows one to reconcile doxastic involuntarism with the Judgment Account, thus undercutting

*Although the *Logic* does not treat ‘or’ or ‘if . . . then’ as truth-functional connectives, the Judgment Account is compatible with doing so. On this view, a disjunction is true if and only if at least one of the disjuncts signifies the idea of a true proposition, and a conditional is true if and only if either the antecedent signifies the idea of a false proposition or the consequent signifies the idea of a true proposition.*
the evidential support that Locke’s doxastic involuntarism seems to provide the Proto-Fregean Interpretation. The problem, recall, is that Locke holds that at least some doxastic attitudes are involuntary, but it seems that forming a mental proposition is always a voluntary act. The problem is solved by appealing to the distinction between forming a mental proposition and having the idea of a mental proposition. The latter is voluntary to exactly the same extent that having any complex idea is voluntary. Indeed, one can choose to think about a mental proposition by having the idea of the corresponding verbal proposition. But forming a mental proposition, because it involves affirming or denying, will only be voluntary in the ways that the various kinds of affirmation and denial are voluntary. Thus, if perceiving an agreement between ideas is, in some cases, completely involuntary, then so is affirming in those cases. And, similarly, if judging that two ideas agree is, in some cases, involuntary, then so is affirming in those cases. Thus, the Judgment Interpretation can accommodate Locke’s doxastic involuntarism just as well as the Proto-Fregean Interpretation can.

Solution 4. Modifications of the Act of Judging: The Port-Royalists attempt to explain some types of propositions by claiming that the act of judging can be modified by other acts or ideas in a way that alters the form of the proposition. The Logic distinguishes three kinds of complex propositions: propositions can have a complex subject, a complex attribute, or can be what is called complex in affirmation or negation. Propositions of the last type are complex in a way that modifies the affirmation or negation expressed by the verb (Logic, 94). Such modifications change the form of the proposition.

The Logic goes on to use this notion of complexity to give an account of modal propositions,

Among these complex propositions where the complexity affects the verb and not the subject or attribute, philosophers have paid particular attention to those called modal, because the affirmation or negation is modified by one of these four modes: possible, contingent, impossible, necessary. Because each mode can be affirmed or denied, as in “it is possible” or “it is not impossible,” and joined in either way to an affirmative or negative proposition, such as “the earth is round” or “the earth is not round,” each mode can have four propositions. (Logic, 95)

The view here is that four modes can modify the affirmation or negation in a proposition. For example, one forms the proposition ‘It is possible that the earth is round’ by joining the mode of possibility to the proposition that the earth is round. But here we run into the problem of modal judgments: How can we join the mode of possibility to the proposition that the earth is round and yet not judge that the earth is actually round? This problem can be avoided if we take seriously the suggestion that modal phrases signify modes that modify the act of affirmation or negation in a way that changes the form of the mental proposition. The view seems to be that affirming the possibility of something is a mode of affirming, so that, when one forms the proposition that it is possible that the earth is round one affirms in the merely possible way that the earth is round.43 Given this view,

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43Van der Schaar argues that the Port-Royalists use the notion of modification to distinguish basic propositions, which are asserted, from deviant or non-standard propositions, including unasserted propositions or “judgment-candidates” (“Locke and Arnauld on Judgment and Proposition,” 334–35).
it would be reasonable for the Port-Royalists to take it to solve the problem of modal judgments.

Locke does not explicitly recognize affirming the necessity of something and affirming the possibility of something as distinct modes of affirmation, but this may well be because he has little to say about necessity. For Locke, certainty is a much more important notion. Locke does claim that different ways of knowing something correspond to different kinds or degrees of certainty. Thus, intuition and demonstration are different degrees of knowledge because they are different ways of perceiving the agreement or disagreement between ideas. Analogously, Locke distinguishes degrees of judgment or assent, ranging from “assurance” down to “conjecture,” “waverings,” “distrust,” and “disbelief” (Essay, IV.xvi.9, 663). Thus, Locke accounts for degrees of certainty in terms of ways of affirming or denying.

6. Conclusion

Consideration of the possible solutions reveals, I think, that the Judgment Account is not obviously doomed after all. Yet one still might wonder why Locke and the Port-Royalists were actually attracted to this view. It is hard for contemporary philosophers to grasp why one might actually be deeply committed to the Judgment Account: the Fregean distinction between propositional content and assertoric force seems so natural to us and its virtues so obvious that the Judgment Account is easily dismissed as a terrible confusion. I do not deny that the distinction between propositional content and assertoric force has considerable philosophical power, but I do deny that the Judgment Account is, as Geach claims, a view that “a moment’s consideration shows will not do.”

Indeed, the Judgment Account succeeds in offering a substantive explanation of the difference between forming a complex idea and forming a propositional thought with a truth-value. The view that forming a propositional thought differs from forming a complex idea because the former involves forming a doxastic attitude has significant intuitive appeal. It also, I think, leads to an attractive conception of truth, one that closely links truth and falsity with correctness and incorrectness. A proposition is false, on this view, because forming it involves making a mistaken judgment. Things that are neither correct nor incorrect, like forming the complex idea of a red ball, are neither true nor false.

While the ability of the Fregean distinction to solve at once the problems that seem to face the Judgment Account is dramatic evidence of its philosophical power, it is also evidence (though perhaps less direct) of the depth of Locke’s and the Port-Royalists’ commitment to the Judgment Account. In contrast, the solutions to these problems that the Judgment Account must embrace might seem woefully ad hoc. But I think this is not actually the case. Once one holds that forming a complete thought of the form “S is P” is a matter of judging that the ideas of S and P agree, it becomes possible to explain other, more complex thoughts in terms of the basic case. One may also form mental propositions about

A key difference between van der Schaar’s reading and my own is that, on my view, the four modes of judgment are ways of affirming or denying and thus remain doxastic.

other mental propositions, either one’s own or someone else’s. One may form propositions about relations holding among propositions, which will yield logically complex propositions. Finally, if taking ideas to agree is a general kind of mental act, it should not be surprising that there will be specific ways of taking ideas to agree and different kinds of agreement. From this perspective, we can start to see the solutions to the problems allegedly facing the Judgment Account as natural extensions of the theory, which starts by accounting for our ability to think simple thoughts, like that the ball is red, and goes on to explain much more sophisticated ones, including logically complex and modal ones.

It is historically inaccurate and distorts our understanding of Locke and traditional approaches to logic to assume that any philosopher would eagerly embrace the distinction between propositional content and judgment, if only it had occurred to him. Indeed, there is textual evidence that the Port-Royalists recognize something very close to the Fregean distinction, but conclude that it can safely be dismissed. In the first edition of the Logie, the Port-Royalists claim,

> It is not easy to make clear nor even to understand what takes place in the mind whenever we affirm something, and to decide whether this is done by the simple view of the mind accompanied by consent, by which it represents something as containing a certain attribute by a single idea, or whether there really are two ideas, one for the subject and the other for the attribute, with a certain act of the mind which connects one with the other. (Logie, 129)

The proposal that affirmation involves a “simple view of the mind” together with “consent” is a version of the Proto-Fregean Account.\(^4^4\) A “simple view of the mind” seems to be mere apprehension of some propositional content and “consent” seems to be a distinct act of assent to that content.\(^4^5\) Yet even the mention of this kind of account is removed entirely from the second edition. But the next sentence remains unchanged: “It is certain that we can express a proposition to others only if we use two ideas, one for the subject and the other for the attribute, and another word that indicates the connection the mind conceives between them.”

This passage shows that a version of the Proto-Fregean Account does seem to the Port-Royalists to be a real option, but it does not strike them as obviously correct. Indeed, they deem it not worth mentioning in later editions of the text. The passage does reveal a bit of hesitation about the correctness of the view they advance, but it also suggests a considered preference for the Judgment Account over at least one version of the Proto-Fregean Account. If the Judgment Account really involves a “monstrous and unholy union” of predication and judgment—though I doubt that it does—I submit that it is at least not an obviously monstrous and unholy union.\(^4^6\)

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\(^4^4\) Notice, however, that even this possibility treats affirmation as doxastic and is therefore incompatible with Ott’s interpretation of affirmation as a subpropositional act.

\(^4^5\) Most likely, the Port-Royalists have in mind Descartes’s view that judgment is an act of the will. Descartes’s view is, I take it, a version of the Proto-Fregean Account.

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