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# From *Remnants* to *Things*, and Back Again

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### 2.1 Introduction

When I was a student in Germany in the early nineties I had the good fortune to come across a copy of Stephen Schiffer's book *Remnants of Meaning*. While the spirit in the local philosophy department was that it would be premature to read anything published after 1950 unless one first had a good understanding of the differences between Wittgenstein's early, middle, and late periods, Schiffer's book provided a very refreshing and accessible fast-track to the contemporary debates in the philosophy of language, and a vivid portrayal of what it is like to struggle with these issues. I learned a tremendous amount from studying this book.

But besides all that, *Remnants of Meaning* seemed to me then, and still seems to me now, to contain a deep and important insight, one that is widely neglected and underappreciated to this day. It is the insight that that-clauses are first and foremost clauses, not referring expressions, and thus they do not refer to propositions or anything else. This insight has profound consequences in a number of areas in philosophy, and spelling out how to understand it involves a number of subtle philosophical issues that lead away from what is agreed upon among many philosophers of language these days. But this insight is so widely neglected that, I'm afraid, even Schiffer himself started to neglect it. When I had a chance to meet Schiffer in person a year or so after studying his book, I was surprised to find out that he had already changed his mind, in particular about what seemed to me to be the deep insight. He now held that that-clauses do refer to propositions after all, but propositions are a kind of second-class entity. This new view is developed in his recent book *The Things We Mean*. As a view about that-clauses and propositions it is a big change from *Remnants of Meaning*, or *Remnants* from now on. To me it was never really clear what made Schiffer change his mind. The official reasons he gives in *The Things We Mean*, or *Things* for short, don't strike me as very good reasons. Not that there weren't plenty of problems with his view in *Remnants*, but it wasn't them that got Schiffer to switch sides.

In the following I would like to look at one important aspect of Schiffer's views in *Remnants* and in *Things*, and what Schiffer's official reasons are for his change of

mind. I will argue that those reasons aren't very good, but that there are a number of problems with his view in *Remnants* as well as with his view in *Things*. In fact, some of the problems are the same. I will argue, however, that the problems from *Remnants* have a solution, and I will outline what I take the solution to be. Here I take the liberty to refer to some of my own papers where these ideas have been developed. We can avoid the problems from *Remnants*, but the problems with *Things* are more serious.\*

## 2.2 From Remnants to Things

When Schiffer changed his mind between writing *Remnants* and *Things*, it wasn't his first time. He also changed his mind between writing his first book *Meaning* and his second book, *Remnants*. But that time Schiffer gave a detailed criticism of the view of his earlier book in his new book. A whole chapter in *Remnants* is devoted to the failures of the research program he used to subscribe to, and the book in general is set up as a refutation of his earlier views. But in *Things* Schiffer spends only about two and a half pages (pp. 89–92) explaining why he changed his mind. While I find the criticism of his first book in his second convincing, I can't say the same for the criticism of his second book in his third. We will have to have a closer look at what happened.

Both *Remnants* and *Things* are complex books covering many different topics. And both contain a variety of theories that are not of central concern for us here. As far as I can see, most of these theories are independent of whether one holds a view of that-clauses and propositions as in *Remnants* or as in *Things*. We will focus on where these two books differ most directly: the question whether that-clauses refer to propositions, and whether there are such things as propositions or meanings. To do this, let me first outline Schiffer's view on the matter in *Remnants*, then his new view about this in *Things*, and finally, what his official reason for the change is.

### 2.2.1 *Remnants*

Schiffer's view in *Remnants* is basically the following: there is no way to accommodate belief ascriptions in a compositional semantic theory. To do so would require treating them relationally, as a relation between a believer and what they believe. The second relatum would have to be what a that-clause refers to, and that reference would have to be compositionally determined by the relevant expressions that occur in the that-clause. But after looking at the available options, Schiffer concludes that this can't be done. Thus natural languages don't have compositional semantic theories after all, he concludes, and that-clauses don't refer to propositions. They are non-referring expressions instead. Nonetheless, quantification into a that-clause position is possible, and various inferences involving such quantifiers are valid. But this quantification is different from quantification over objects and has to be understood as substitutional quantification. In addition, Schiffer gave an ingenious account of how language understanding can work without a compositional semantics by outlining a non-inferential approach to language understanding in which a compositional semantics plays no role.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2.2 *Things*

In *Things* Schiffer agrees with his former self that one can't construct the referent of a that-clause from the referents of the expressions that occur in it and the way they are put together. But this doesn't mean that that-clauses don't refer, it just means they don't refer to structured entities, and they don't refer to entities that can be identified with entities that are constructed out of other entities. But nonetheless, he now holds, they do refer. They refer to *sui generis* entities instead: pleonastic propositions. They are pleonastic in the sense that, according to Schiffer, their existence is guaranteed by something-from-nothing transformations, like

1. a. Fido is a dog.
- b. Thus that Fido is a dog is true.

We can introduce a that-clause apparently without change of truth conditions, and according to Schiffer's new view, this guarantees that there is an entity that the that-clause refers to. This view of pleonastic entities is modified to rule out certain problematic cases, and Schiffer adds the condition that the introduction of these entities has to be a conservative extension<sup>2</sup> of what we can conclude without them. I won't discuss this aspect of his view here, though. Thus, overall, that-clauses refer, they refer to propositions, but these are pleonastic entities, *sui generis* entities whose existence is guaranteed by talking about them in something-from-nothing transformations. Propositions exist just as you and I do, and quantification over them is just plain old objectual quantification.

### 2.2.3 *Schiffer's change of heart*

Although there are many instances in which Schiffer agrees with himself across time, the transition from a no-reference theory to a reference theory of that-clauses is almost a 180-degree turn.<sup>3</sup> Many of the things that Schiffer says in the rest of *Things* seem to me to be just as good with the old theory of propositions from *Remnants*, though the details of this claim are debatable. So, why did Schiffer change his mind?

As I said above, Schiffer is surprisingly brief in explaining this transition. His official reason is spelled out in *Things* on pages 89–92. He says: 'The reason I switched from the no-reference, non-objectual quantification line to my present view... was that I came to think that if that was the solution, then what the hell was the problem?' (*Things*, 90). Schiffer then imagines a debate between his former, *Remnants*, self, and his present, *Things*, self about the reality of properties. They both agree that there are properties they both have, that Fido has the property of being a dog, etc., but they disagree whether or not properties exist, that is, whether or not there is an ontology of properties.

'What came to unsettle me were two related things. The first was that I couldn't see either how that dispute could have a determinate resolution or what the cash-value of the dispute really amounted to. Relative to all our agreement, what could the further question about existence amount to such that it could be answered?... The second thing that moved me was the realization that whatever established the truth of statements ostensibly about properties and

propositions, and whatever allowed us to know the truths those statements expressed, would establish the existence and nature of properties and propositions'... (*Things*, 91)

I find these reasons puzzling. On the first, I don't see why one can't make sense of the idea that, even though two people agree on the truth value of most sentences talking about propositions, they still disagree on what they do when they talk about propositions. This situation strikes me as no different than a dispute between a cognitivist and a non-cognitivist in ethics, or any dispute about realism, or even a dispute between someone who holds that names are descriptions and someone that holds that they are not. In each case these people will not disagree about the ordinary statements involving names or talk about what to do, but on what we do when we talk that way. To be sure in each case it is a substantial philosophical project to work out what the philosophical difference comes down to, but this applies to most areas in philosophy. In Schiffer's case, the difference is one of the semantic function of that-clauses and certain uses of quantifiers. This is a disagreement about semantics, and it seems to me it makes just as much sense as any other disagreement in semantics. Furthermore, it is a symmetric situation. If this disagreement makes no sense, then either the two views are the same, or none of them makes any sense. But since Schiffer changed his mind from the old view to the new one, there is a real issue to change one's mind about. But in any case, doubts about the legitimacy of the debate between the two views are no reason to go from one view in the debate to the other. And I found the second reason unconvincing as well. The no-reference theory of that-clauses or property nominalizations can say quite a bit about what makes sentences in which non-referring terms occur true. I won't get into what can or should be said about this now, but we will discuss it below in section 2.5.3.

Although Schiffer's reasons for rejecting the view in *Remnants* are unconvincing to me, there are plenty of problems with his view in that book, and there are also plenty of problems with his view in *Things*. It seems to me that these are real problems, but that the ones from *Remnants* can be solved. And we can see what kinds of considerations allows us to decide between these kinds of views, and that in the end *Remnants* wins over *Things*.

## 2.3 The Real Problems with *Remnants*

There are a number of problems with the view that Schiffer held in *Remnants*. Not that these are devastating problems, but they at least require one to say more than what was said in *Remnants*. I will focus on the ones that strike me as particularly central for a defense of a no-reference theory of that-clauses, and related expressions.

### 2.3.1 Quantification

According to *Remnants*, quantification over propositions is substitutional quantification, but quantification over objects is not. That is to say, the quantifiers in the following two sentences are different:

2. Everything he believes is true.
3. Everything he eats is tasty.

But this requires an account of how that can be so. After all, isn't it the same word 'everything' that occurs in both examples? And why should we think that quantifiers are different when they range over one domain, propositions, than over another, food, say? It isn't enough to say that the former quantifier can be interpreted as a substitutional one. The question rather is: is this the correct interpretation, and how can it be that what appears to be one and the same word sometimes has one interpretation, and sometimes another? Whatever story one wants to tell here, it will have to be told as a story about the semantics of our ordinary use of the word 'everything' and similar quantified expressions.

### 2.3.2 *Inexpressibility*

In *Remnants* Schiffer held that quantification over propositions is substitutional quantification, but as he notes himself in a footnote,<sup>4</sup> this can't be quite the whole story. Substitutional quantifiers need substitution instances, but sometimes it seems that quantification over propositions doesn't have such instances, at least not with sentences of our own language as the substitution class. For example:

4. There are propositions not expressible in present-day English.

most likely is true, but the quantifier in it can't be understood as a substitutional quantifier with the sentences of present day English as the substitution class. Any instance of the quantifier involves an expressible proposition. When Schiffer discusses this in the above mentioned footnote he suggests that quantifiers over propositions are neither objectual nor substitutional, and that we shouldn't expect that such quantifiers are nicely captured by quantifiers in formal languages. But this just raises the question more vividly how such quantifiers are supposed to be understood.

But besides the technicalities about quantification, there is also a deeper issue. According to the no-reference theory, propositions do not form a language-independent domain of entities, since propositions are not entities at all, and thus in particular not language-independent entities. Still, talk about propositions nonetheless makes sense. But when we talk about propositions we don't talk about them in a referential sense of 'about,' but in a different, more innocent sense. Let's distinguish a referential sense of 'about' from a topical sense. In the former one is referring to what one is talking about. For this to be so, the relevant expressions in the sentences one uses in this discourse have to be referential expressions. In the latter, topical sense, however, this is not required. Here what one is talking about is simply the topic of one's conversation. In this sense one can talk about aliens, even if there are none. And in this sense it is no problem for the believer in the no-reference theory to hold that we can talk about propositions. Using the that-clause 'that Fido is a dog' I can talk about the proposition that Fido is a dog. Talk about propositions thus makes sense on either theory. But when we talk about inexpressible propositions things get more difficult for the no-reference theory. How can we understand the apparent truth of:

5. Some propositions which are not expressible in English are expressible in French, but others are not.

There is no domain over which this quantifier ranges, since there are no propositions out there to form such a domain. How can the no-reference theory understand this? There is no similar problem for expressible propositions, since the no-reference theory can hold that quantifiers over expressible propositions are somehow derivative on the instances (of course, the details of how this is to be understood more precisely would have to be worked out on such a proposal).

Thus, besides any technicalities about quantifiers, inexpressible propositions seem to be at odds with the no-reference theory of that-clauses. To me, this is ultimately the most important problem for any no-reference theory. In fact, it even reoccurs as a problem in Schiffer's present theory, as we will see below.

### 2.3.3 *That-clauses outside of belief ascriptions*

Schiffer's discussion of that-clauses in *Remnants* focused on that-clauses in belief ascriptions, and other propositional attitude ascriptions. But there is much more to that-clauses than that, and some of the occurrences of that-clauses are outside of attitude ascriptions. Besides ordinary cases like:

6. That Schiffer changed his mind is surprising.

we also have the something-from-nothing transformations, which seem to be rather telling about that-clauses. Such clauses can be introduced apparently without change of truth conditions from virtually any statement:

7. a. Fido is a dog.  
b. Thus, that Fido is a dog is true.  
c. Thus, there is something which is true, namely that Fido is a dog.

Any account of the function of that-clauses will have to say what is going on in such inferences. Schiffer will take this more seriously in *Things*, but in *Remnants* it doesn't play a crucial role. In any case, it isn't clear how we should understand such inferences and that-clauses.

### 2.3.4 *The argument for the no-reference theory*

Schiffer's argument in *Remnants* for the no-reference theory is rather indirect: If that-clauses refer then their referent has to be compositionally determined by the semantic values of the parts of the that-clause, assuming that natural languages have a compositional semantics. But, he argued, there is no way to assign that-clauses their referent meeting these conditions. Thus that-clauses don't refer, and natural languages don't have a compositional semantics. This does not strike me as a very powerful argument. To the contrary, it seems to me that whether or not that-clauses refer is independent of whether or not natural languages have a compositional semantics. In fact, whether or not an expression refers is quite independent of how it is treated in contemporary compositional semantic theories.

To see this, consider the use of semantic values in semantic theories, for example ones that use higher type objects as semantic values, like Montague Grammar and related approaches. In such semantic theories every expression gets a semantic value, whether or not it refers. Words like 'very' or 'most' or 'Peter' all have semantic values, although the first two are not referring expressions. In addition, referring expressions

usually don't get their referents as their semantic values. To be able to accommodate complex noun phrases, like 'Peter and some woman,' the semantic value of a proper name gets 'type raised' to the same kind of semantic value that a quantifier has. The semantic value of 'Peter' might be the set of all the properties that Peter has, but that is not what 'Peter' refers to. The referent is still Peter, and he has to have some proper relationship to the semantic value of 'Peter,' so that the truth conditions overall come out correctly. But all that is required is such a relationship, not that the referent and the semantic value are the same.

And similarly for that-clauses. Even if we could have a compositional semantics for that-clauses, it wouldn't mean that they refer. Even if we can assign them semantic values that capture their contribution to the truth conditions, it would not mean that these semantic values are the referents of that-clauses, i.e. propositions, nor that that-clauses are referring expressions. Schiffer's arguments that a compositional semantics has to treat belief ascriptions relationally, as a relation between a believer and what they believe, thus is only partly correct. It might well be correct that the only way to get a compositional semantics for belief ascriptions is to assign a relation as the semantic value to 'believes,' and to assign a semantic value to the term for the believer, and another semantic value to the that-clause that specifies what is believed. But this is not enough to establish the claim which is intended by Schiffer, namely that the that-clause is a referential singular term.<sup>5</sup> It only shows that in a compositional semantics that-clauses have to get their own semantic values. But that doesn't show that they are referential.

And, analogously, even if there is no compositional semantics for that-clauses, it doesn't mean that that-clauses don't refer. They might refer, although their referent is not semantically compositionally determined. So, these two issues are independent of each other. Thus Schiffer actually does not have a good argument in *Remnants* that that-clauses don't refer. Much of his discussion in that book is focused on the failure to accommodate belief ascriptions in a compositional semantic theory, but this issue is actually independent of the question whether or not that-clauses refer.<sup>6</sup>

This raises the question how we are to decide whether an expression is a referring expression. An argument for or against it can't come from the treatment of that-clauses in a compositional semantics. It rather has to come from some other feature of that-clauses. As it turns out, there are some good arguments that that-clauses don't refer, but in Schiffer's work they only appear in *Things*. There, of course, they are arguments against his view, and he accordingly rejects them. But as we will see below, these arguments are more powerful than he takes them to be.

Before we have a look to see whether these problems can be solved on a no-reference theory, let's look at how things stand with *Things*.

## 2.4 The Trouble with *Things*

If a no-reference theory is a coherent option for the semantics of that-clauses then the question becomes what reason we might have to think it is wrong, and thus what reason we have to think that a reference theory is correct. As far as I can tell, there are two lines of argument in *Things* that aim to establish that that-clauses refer and that propositions exist. One is based on an analogy, the other is based on a certain view

about the relationship between syntax and semantics. Both strike me as unsuccessful. In fact, it seems that Schiffer slightly changed his mind while writing *Things* about which of the two is best for understanding propositions as pleonastic entities. He uses two really quite different kinds of considerations to support his view, one he had used before in some papers written between *Remnants* and *Things*,<sup>7</sup> and another one which is first explicit in *Things*, as far as I know, and which, I think, is really to be preferred, but still problematic.

The first consideration is the analogy between that-clauses and names for fictional characters. According to Schiffer, there are two ways to talk about fictional characters. One is the use of a fictional name in the fiction. In such a use the name doesn't refer to anything. But once we step back and talk about the fictional character in that fiction we succeed in referring to something. This is a case of a pleonastic entity, one that we succeed in picking out just by starting to use a term that aims to refer. The same holds, Schiffer claims, when we start to use that-clauses or other terms that are introduced in something-from-nothing transformations. But this story to me isn't very satisfying. First, there are many important differences between fictional characters and propositions. Fictional characters, on this story, are supposed to supervene on someone writing the fiction. But nothing analogous to this can be true for propositions, as Schiffer himself notes, since propositions, if they exist at all, have to exist necessarily and at all times. They supervene on our talking about them only if they supervene on birds flying as well. Since they exist necessarily and timelessly, they supervene on everything if they supervene on anything. Secondly, the story about fictional characters Schiffer tells and more or less takes for granted is very controversial, and I for one would not subscribe to it. It is not at all clear that when we talk about the fictional characters in a story we are succeeding in referring to an entity. Alternatively, for example, we might just use the same non-referring fictional name, say 'Sherlock Holmes,' but aposit 'the fictional character' next to it, which wouldn't affect the function of the name.

The second consideration Schiffer uses to support his view of that-clauses as referring to pleonastic entities is basically an adoption of Frege's account of numbers as logical objects. Frege held that we can see that numbers are objects since we can introduce sentences with singular terms for numbers in them apparently without change of truth conditions from sentences that don't contain such singular terms. The argument, ultimately, that these singular terms are referring expressions, and that they do succeed in referring to numbers, is what is often called *the syntactic priority thesis*. This is the thesis that what it is to be an object is only to be understood as that which a singular term stands for. Thus the apparently semantic category of an object is to be understood as derivative of the apparently syntactic category of a singular term. Singular terms in true sentences do succeed in referring to objects since that's just what it is to be a referring term and what it is to be an object.<sup>8</sup> This Fregean line, it seems to me, is really what Schiffer's view relies on. And it is better suited to his view than the analogy with fictional characters. And although this line is somewhat popular in the philosophy of mathematics, it relies on a mistaken view in the philosophy of language. It is the view that there is one and only one semantic function of syntactically singular terms. The neo-Fregeans never provide evidence for it of the kind that seems to be required to hold it, namely evidence from syntax,



semantics, and their relationship. Rather they disguise what ultimately is a very controversial view about the relationship between syntax and semantics as a deep philosophical insight about the relationship between language and the world. But as a view about the relationship between syntax and semantics it is very controversial, to say the least, and false, in my opinion. I will present one case below where it doesn't hold. Singular terms have a variety of different semantic functions, only one of them is to refer to an object. To settle this issue requires a detailed study of various cases in natural language. The neo-Fregeans never provide such arguments, and thus I don't think we should believe them that there is only one semantic function of syntactically singular terms. Now, Schiffer doesn't defend the syntactic priority thesis as such, but in effect his Fregean argument for that-clauses being referring expressions relies on it. And because of this I think it should be rejected.

Schiffer's position in *Things* also faces some other problems. For one, his new view just as his old view has a problem with inexpressible propositions. This problem is not unfamiliar to neo-Fregeans about mathematics. The neo-Fregeans about arithmetic don't have to worry about there being more numbers than there are singular terms for them. Every natural number is denoted by a singular term in our language. But once we get to the real numbers this is not so any more. But how can the Fregean, who holds onto the syntactic priority thesis, endorse that there are more (pleonastic) objects than there are singular terms for them? Wasn't the syntactic category of a singular term supposed to be more basic than that of an object? And wasn't that the basis of the argument that the singular terms denote at all? How can there be objects then that remain undenoted? This points to a tension in the Frege-inspired line that introduces pleonastic objects, one that might be overcome, but it certainly is worthy of some more attention. In fact, Hale and Wright list this problem in the appendix of *The Reason's Proper Study* as problem 4 in their list of 18 problems that neo-Fregeans face.<sup>9</sup> They call it the *Problem of Plenitude*.

And similarly for Schiffer. How can there be propositions that aren't denoted by a that-clause? Schiffer addresses this problem all too briefly in a paragraph, discussing properties:

Finally, what about inexpressible properties? ... My view here is that we can make sense of such properties just by virtue of our ability to make sense of there being a language—an enrichment of our own language or a completely different language—in which such properties are expressible. (*Things*, 71)

This answer does not strike me as satisfactory. It is not clear that we are making sense of there being inexpressible properties when we make sense of there being an enrichment of our language. True enough, we can make sense of our language containing more words in its vocabulary, but that doesn't guarantee that these words express more than what could be expressed before. This way we don't make sense that there are inexpressible propositions, just that there are more words in our language. Even when we imagine that these new words mean something different from what our other words mean we still don't imagine that we can express more propositions, since what the new word means might be the same as what a combination of old words mean. What we really imagine in the situation in Schiffer's quote is that there is a language in which more propositions are expressible than in our

language. And that is, we imagine that there are more propositions than the ones expressible in our language, and a language that expresses them. But it is not at all clear whether this is compatible with Schiffer's view in *Things*. Are we imagining something coherent when we do this, if Schiffer is right? This is of course perfectly coherent on a view of propositions that takes them to be language-independent entities, but neither Schiffer's old view nor his new view are like that. The problem of inexpressible propositions is much more serious than Schiffer's brief discussion makes it out to be.

So, do we have to go back to propositions as forming a language-independent domain of entities? I will suggest in the following that we can in fact solve the problems from *Remnants*, and that a no-reference theory is defensible, and correct.

## 2.5 Solving the Problems from *Remnants*

The problems discussed above for Schiffer's version of the no-reference theory in *Remnants* can be solved. I will outline in this section how I think they should be solved. I won't be able to spell out the solutions outlined below in detail, of course, but I will refer to some papers where these solutions are developed in more detail.

### 2.5.1 Quantification

Most expressions in natural language have a variety of closely connected meanings, that is, they are polysemous. Paradigmatically this is true of verbs, for example 'get,' which can mean many different things in English, as for example in

8. Before I get home I should get some beer to get drunk.

But there is a false picture that was handed down to us from the early days of the philosophy of language, which we could call *the myth of the logical skeleton*. This myth says that although most expressions in natural language are somewhat soft, vague, and polysemous, there is a hard skeleton which is different, and on which the rest of language is built. This skeleton consists of the logical expressions, which are the bones and which hold up the rest of language as its core. But that the expressions we know from propositional logic are not like that is nowadays universally agreed upon. Take words like 'and' or 'if... then.' 'And' is not just a sentential connective as in propositional logic. It can combine verbs or noun phrases, and it can have collective or distributive readings. Conditionals are not at all the Boolean connective we encounter in logic, and similarly for other 'logical constants.' And the same is true for quantifiers, or so it seems to me. Quantifiers are polysemous just like most other expressions, and they can make different contributions to the truth conditions of a sentence in which they occur. That this is so can be seen quite independently of issues about that-clauses. Quantifiers have at least two different readings. On one of them they range over a domain of entities, whatever they may be. According to this *domain conditions reading*, the contribution that the quantifier makes to the truth conditions is that the domain of entities satisfies a certain condition, depending on what quantifier it is and what the rest of the sentence is like. But besides this reading there is at least one further one. It is the one where we use the quantifier for its inferential role. On this *inferential role reading* the quantified sentence inferentially

relates to quantifier-free sentences, and how this relationship goes will depend on which quantifier it is, and where it occurs. In languages like ours these two readings come apart in truth conditions, although they coincide in truth conditions in simpler languages, describing a simpler world. If every object in the domain of discourse is denoted by a term, and every term in the language denotes an object in the domain of discourse, then inferential role and domain conditions coincide with respect to truth conditions. But our language and our world are not like that. Still, we have a need for both uses of quantifiers, and polysemous quantifiers give us both, with different contributions to the truth conditions from different readings of one and the same quantifier. This view is developed in more detail in Hofweber (2000) and Hofweber (2005b).

If this is so then we can see how one and the same word ‘everything’ in our above examples 2. and 3. can range over food in one case and over propositions in the other, even though it makes quite a different contribution to the truth conditions. It can then be that when talking about food we use the quantifier in its domain conditions reading, since we want to make a claim about whatever food is out there in the domain of discourse, whereas when we are talking about propositions we want to inferentially relate the sentence we uttered to any instance of the quantifier. In fact, we are thereby endorsing every instance. These two uses of the quantifiers thus are available generally, to any kind of quantification, over food, propositions, people, and so on. It will have to be a feature of particular uses of the quantifiers that accounts for it having one or the other reading that the quantifier can have.

The inferential role reading of the quantifier is closely related to a substitutional interpretation, but also subtly different. These similarities and differences are discussed in the papers cited above. Similarly, the domain conditions reading corresponds to an objectual interpretation of the quantifier. But understanding them this way we can see how one and the same quantifier can do both of these things, and we can see that this is so independently of any issues about ontology.

Even though the motivation for the two readings of the quantifiers does not come from ontology, that there are these two readings has consequences for ontology. In fact, it follows that ontological questions like

9. Are there propositions?

and their answers

10. There are propositions.

themselves have two readings each. On one of them it is trivially true that there are propositions, and on the other it is not. Take (10), and assume that it contains a quantifier over propositions. On the inferential role reading of this quantifier it follows trivially from anything using the something-from-nothing transformations. Or take (9). This question has two readings, one using a quantifier in its inferential role reading, the other using it in its domain conditions reading. In the inferential role reading it is trivially answered by (10) when it, too, is used in its inferential role reading. But on the other, domain conditions reading of (9) this is not so. This reading of the question is only answered by (10) in its domain conditions reading, but to get that is not trivial and it is not established in the something-from-nothing

transformations. All this gives us a version of Carnap's internal–external distinction about questions about what there is, and in fact it seems to me that any version of a no-reference theory will ultimately have to take recourse to such a distinction. This is discussed in more detail in Hofweber (2005b).

### 2.5.2 *Inexpressibility*

The most serious problem for any no-reference theory of that-clauses, and any theory that holds that propositions are not language-independent entities, which includes Schiffer's theory in *Things*, is the inexpressibility worry. How can we make sense that there are propositions that are not expressible with any sentence? The key to understanding this requires a closer look at what motivates us into thinking that there are inexpressible propositions. And to understand this it helps to make some distinctions. Fix a particular language for the following, like present-day English. Let's call a proposition *speaker expressible* if there is some context such that a speaker can express that proposition with an utterance of a sentence in that context. Let's call a proposition *language expressible* if there is a sentence such that every utterance of that sentence expresses that proposition, no matter what the context. The language expressible propositions are basically the ones that can be expressed with the utterance of a sentence that does not contain any context sensitive elements in it. The speaker expressible ones are the ones expressible with utterances of sentences that contain context sensitive elements, and any context is allowed. The language expressible and speaker expressible propositions come apart in a language like contemporary English. For example, not every object is denoted by a term in this language. If *O* is such an undenoted object then the proposition that Bill Clinton is heavier than *O* is not language expressible. But it is speaker expressible in a context where the speaker has *O* available for demonstrative reference, and utters the sentence 'Clinton is heavier than this.'

In Hofweber (2006a) I argue that this difference between what is language expressible and what is speaker expressible in arbitrary contexts is essentially used in the arguments that have been offered to motivate that there are inexpressible propositions. Since no direct example of an inexpressible proposition can be given, arguments for there being such propositions have to be indirect. But there are good arguments that show that not all propositions are language expressible in contemporary English. They refute a simple substitutional account of quantification over propositions according to which the substitution class consists of context insensitive sentences of one's own language. For every proposition there would have to be a context insensitive sentence in contemporary English that expresses it, which is the substitution instance that makes a quantified statement true. Since this isn't so, context sensitive expressions have to be accommodated somehow. But it is not at all clear how one could have something like a substitutional quantifier that allows for context sensitive sentences to be in the substitution class, since after all the contexts that are needed to give demonstratives their values aren't part of the substitution class. But a version of an inferential role reading of quantifiers over propositions can accommodate this, or so I argued in Hofweber (2006a). The key here is to understand how context sensitive expressions figure into the inferential role of quantifiers over propositions or properties, and how this can be captured in an account of the truth

conditions of such quantifiers that sees them still only as inferential quantifiers, without a domain of entities over which they range. I won't repeat the only slightly technical details here, but I believe that this can be done satisfactorily, and that this modified account of inferential quantifiers can accommodate all good arguments for their being inexpressible propositions. On the resulting view there are different senses of 'inexpressible' to be distinguished, and there are no inexpressible propositions in one sense of 'inexpressible,' but there are inexpressible propositions in another sense of 'inexpressible.' Every proposition is expressible in the sense of 'can be expressed with a sentence in some context or other,' but not every proposition is expressible in the sense of 'can be expressed with a sentence without context sensitive elements in it.' Quantification over propositions has to be understood as generalizing over the instances with context sensitive expressions in them<sup>10</sup> and this is perfectly compatible with the no-reference theory of that-clauses. There are also a number of positive consequences to this account, in particular how we should understand change in expressive power in a language over time, but I won't get into them here. The details of all this are in Hofweber (2006a).

If this view of expressibility is correct then it solves the problems that the no-reference theory has with inexpressible propositions. Incidentally, it can also be used to rid Schiffer's new theory of its problems with inexpressible propositions. It alone won't help us to decide between these two theories, but it removes the apparent advantage that theories have that hold that propositions are language-independent entities, only some of which might be expressed by any particular language, while some might not be expressible in any language whatsoever.

### 2.5.3 *That-clauses outside of belief ascriptions*

If that-clauses in belief ascriptions don't refer then what do they do? The easy answer is that instead of referring to something which is the content of the belief, they merely specify what the content of the belief is. Saying what the content of a belief is can be done without referring to a content. But there are questions left for the use of that-clauses that go beyond that. One of them concerns that-clauses outside of belief ascriptions in general, but here the same options apply for both approaches. With regard to:

#### 6. That Schiffer changed his mind is surprising.

one theory says that the that-clause refers to what is surprising, the other says that the that-clause specifies what is surprising. But for both theories there is one phenomenon that goes beyond that and which needs some more explanation. That-clauses, as well as some other phrases like property nominalization and number words, can be introduced as singular terms apparently without change of truth conditions. This feature takes center stage in Schiffer's theory in *Things*, where it is crucial that these new singular terms are referring, since after all, being introduced this way is constitutive of the entities that we end up referring to, according to *Things*. But this account of the something-from-nothing transformation seems to me to miss an important aspect they have, one that ultimately speaks in favor of the no-reference theory. Consider again the something-from-nothing transformations, or as we will also call them, the transition from an *innocent statement*, a statement that

seems to have nothing to do with metaphysics, to one of its *metaphysically loaded counterparts*:

11. a. Fido is a dog.  
b. Thus: That Fido is a dog is true.  
c. (Or:) Thus: Fido has the property of being a dog.

This can also been done with numbers:

12. a. Jupiter has four moons.  
b. Thus: The number of moons of Jupiter is four.

In fact, the latter example goes back to Frege's *Grundlagen* (Frege 1884), and just like the other two pairs above, it is puzzling in a number of ways. For one, it contains new singular terms, but nonetheless seems to be equivalent to the original sentence. How can this equivalence then be so obvious, in particular how can it be obvious to ordinary speakers of English without metaphysical opinions on the existence of properties and propositions? Schiffer's new theory of pleonastic propositions and properties can attempt to explain this, but it doesn't quite seem to work as smoothly for numbers. In the case of numbers we get the number word 'four' as a new singular term, but contrary to the properties and propositions cases, it was already present in the innocent statement. But there it occurred in an apparently quite different syntactic category, as an adjective or determiner, as in 'four moons.' But this gives rise to another puzzle. How are we to understand that what appears to be the same word 'four' is both an adjective or determiner, as well as a singular term? Usually adjectives or determiners cannot appear as singular terms without resulting in ungrammaticality. But why can 'four' do this?<sup>11</sup>

The solution to this puzzle is revealed once we look at the function that these loaded counterparts have in actual communication. After all, one might think that since they are truth conditionally equivalent to the innocent statements there would be little use for them in communication, and that it would make little difference whether one uttered the innocent statement or the loaded counterpart. They have the same truth conditions, after all. But there is an important and instructive difference between them. This difference is analogous to the one between an ordinary statement and a clefted sentence:

13. a. Schiffer changed his mind.  
b. It is Schiffer who changed his mind.

They are obviously truth conditionally equivalent, but there is an important difference between them nonetheless. The unclefted sentence (13a) communicates the information neutrally, whereas the clefted sentence (13b) communicates it with a certain emphasis, structure, or focus. This effect can also be achieved with intonation, as in

14. SCHIFFER changed his mind.

However, above we achieve it with a certain syntactic structure. In Hofweber (2005b) and Hofweber (2007a) I have argued that the same effect is achieved with the loaded counterparts. In addition, I have argued that the only way to understand how a

certain syntactic structure can give rise to this focus effect without any special intonation is to understand the new singular terms as non-referring. I won't repeat the arguments here, and in exchange I won't expect you to believe me. But if this is onto something then we can have a quite different understanding of the something-from-nothing transformations. They are not the constitutive transformation for new pleonastic entities, but rather they move from presenting certain information neutrally, without focus, to a way to present the same information with a focus.

#### 2.5.4 *The argument for the no-reference theory*

If it is correct, as I claimed above, that having or not having a compositional semantics for belief ascriptions is independent of whether or not that-clauses refer, then the question becomes how we can decide whether or not that-clauses refer. Even if that-clauses have semantic values in a certain semantic theory, it doesn't mean that they refer to these semantic values, nor does it mean that they refer at all. So, how are we to decide about reference?

One thing that we have let slide throughout this chapter is the question whether 'reference' is really the proper term even if that-clauses have as their semantic function to 'pick out' propositions. If that-clauses refer in the same sense in which names refer, and if we take it for granted that reference so understood is fundamentally different from quantification, then that-clauses would certainly be unusual in that they are syntactically complex referring expressions, a rarity, if it exists at all.<sup>12</sup> But we don't have to settle this issue here. We can agree that according to the reference theory, broadly understood, that-clauses have the semantic function to pick out an entity, and this entity is what a proposition is. So, how can we decide whether that-clauses have the semantic function to pick out an entity?

The best way to decide this is to see directly whether or not that-clauses behave in the way that we would expect for phrases that have the semantic function of picking out an entity. For example, we could see if they exhibit scope ambiguities, and if they do, we could argue that they are quantifiers, which paradigmatically exhibit scope ambiguities. And to see if they are referential we should see if they behave like referential terms. The best way to do this is to see if all that matters for their contribution to the truth conditions is what entity they pick out, and not how it is picked out. This is a feature paradigmatically true of referring expressions, with the usual exceptions of indirect or opaque contexts. Thus the test for referentiality to consider is whether that-clauses can be substituted for other terms that pick out the same entity. If yes, it is evidence for their being referential, if not, it is evidence against them being referential. But as is well known, that-clauses fail this test. If that-clauses like 'that Slovenia will win the World Cup' refer at all then they refer to propositions, in this case the proposition that Slovenia will win the World Cup. But 'the proposition that Slovenia will win the World Cup' also refers to that very same proposition. However, these two phrases are not substitutable for each other without change of truth conditions:

15. Jane fears that Slovenia will win the World Cup.
16. Jane fears the proposition that Slovenia will win the Word Cup.

Both of these fears are unfounded, but they are different. The first because Slovenia can't win the 2006 World Cup in Germany, since they didn't even qualify, coming up short in their qualifying group behind Italy and Norway.<sup>13</sup> The second, however, is no fear about the World Cup, but proposition phobia, fear of propositions themselves. The truth conditions of these two sentences thus differ, since one can be true while the other one is false, and thus that-clauses can't be referring expressions.

This argument isn't found in *Remnants*, but it is discussed explicitly in *Things*, using the above World Cup example. But in *Things* it is an argument against Schiffer's then present view and he accordingly rejects the argument. Schiffer's reason for rejecting it is that he rejects the substitution principle itself. It is not true that two co-referring terms can always be substituted without change of truth conditions, he argues, and the example that shows that this is so is apposition. Schiffer says:

There are clearly non-trick contexts where co-referring terms can't be substituted *salva veritate*. For example, if Pavarotti is the greatest tenor, we still can't substitute 'the greatest tenor' for 'Pavarotti' in

The Italian singer Pavarotti never sings Wagner.  
since

The Italian singer the greatest tenor never sings Wagner.  
isn't even well formed. (*Things*, 93)

I don't think this answer can defuse the above argument that that-clauses don't refer.<sup>14</sup> We should distinguish two kinds of substitution failures. First, *syntactic substitution failure* occurs when we substitute an (allegedly) referring expression for one that refers to the same object, but we thereby change a grammatical sentence to an ungrammatical one. Secondly, there is *semantic substitution failure*. It occurs when we substitute an (allegedly) referring expression for a co-referring one, we preserve grammaticality, but we change the truth conditions. Schiffer's Pavarotti case is one of syntactic substitution failure. However, there is a perfectly good explanation why it occurs, and the fact that it occurs doesn't help the referentialist to explain how semantic substitution failure can occur.

Two expressions can stand for the same object, but have different syntactic properties. For example, 'Pavarotti' and 'the greatest tenor' are different in that the latter starts with the determiner 'the,' whereas the former does not. This difference is enough to explain why on some occurrences one of them is grammatical but the other in the same position is not. Apposition with a phrase that itself starts with a determiner is one example of this. 'The Italian singer' also starts with 'the,' and these two determiners clash when occurring that close to each other in the same noun phrase, as in 'the Italian singer the greatest tenor.' That they clash has a purely syntactic explanation, though I won't attempt to give it. 'The Italian singer Pavarotti' doesn't exhibit this clash of determiners, and it is thus grammatical. And so are 'my friend the greatest tenor' and 'my friend Pavarotti,' and so on. But that this can be so, that co-referring terms can have different syntactic features, is no reason not to be worried about semantic substitution failure. Semantic substitution failure still is incompatible with a referential understanding of the relevant terms. And it is exactly what occurs in the World Cup examples above. Both sentences are grammatical, but



their truth conditions differ. This can't be so on the reference theory, and pointing out that co-referring expressions can have different syntactic properties doesn't help explain how that can be so after all.<sup>15</sup>

The no-reference theory is not threatened by the substitution failures. That two non-referring expressions can't be substituted for one another is no surprise, although it gives rise to the question what precisely the difference between them is. But substitution can't be expected on the no-reference theory, though it should be expected on the reference theory, unless we have a syntactic explanation why grammaticality is not preserved. But since this is not the case in our examples involving that-clauses, the argument against the reference theory stands. In fact, it is a prime example of the kind of argument that is suitable to decide between a reference and a no-reference theory. Substitution failure thus speaks for the no-reference theory.

## 2.6 Conclusion

I have argued that the reasons that moved Schiffer to change his mind between writing *Remnants* and *Things* shouldn't have moved him to do so. In addition, I hope to have at least outlined some of the main ideas that seem to me to allow one to have a coherent no-reference theory of that-clauses. But, of course, there is much more to say about all this. There are many linguistic issues that need to be addressed, and there are philosophical issues that we barely touched on. But besides all this, I have my money on the no-reference theory, and thus I think Schiffer's second of his three books was closest to the truth when it comes to that-clauses and propositions, at least in its vision, if not always in its letter. I learned a tremendous amount from studying Schiffer's books, but we honor our teachers by disagreeing with them. Although I admire Schiffer's work equally over the years, I honor him more now than I did ten years ago.<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

- \* Editor's note: This paper was submitted in 2006, as one of the first for this volume. Although it still represents the author's views, the delay in publication accounts for the fact that more recent work, including his own, is not cited here. Many of the themes of the paper are discussed in more detail in his *Ontology and the Ambitions of Metaphysics* (Hofweber, 2016).
1. See also Schiffer (1991).
  2. 'Conservative extension' is a technical term from proof theory. A theory  $T_2$  is a conservative extension of a theory  $T_1$  iff the vocabulary of  $T_2$  includes all the vocabulary of  $T_1$  and any theorem that can be proven in  $T_2$  that uses only the vocabulary of  $T_1$  can already be proven in  $T_1$ . This has to be slightly adjusted for the present purpose, and in *Things* Schiffer discusses this in some more detail.
  3. It would be a full 180-degree turn if Schiffer held that propositions are just some plain old Platonic entities, completely independent of language. That they are pleonastic preserves some of the spirit of *Remnants*, but also some of its problems, as we will see below.
  4. Footnote 6 of chapter 8 in *Remnants*, p. 288f.
  5. See also Schiffer (1992).

6. See Hofweber (2007b) for more on this.
7. For example, in Schiffer (1996).
8. Schiffer puts it slightly differently on pp. 77–9 of *Things*, but I think this captures the spirit of Frege's approach.
9. See Hale and Wright (2001: 422).
10. See Hofweber (2006a) on how this can be done.
11. The answer suggested below is only a partial answer to this question, since it only covers one case. A more general answer is given in Hofweber (2005a).
12. Complex demonstratives are another, controversial candidate for a complex referring expression.
13. And as events have unfolded since I wrote the above, it became even harder. By now, unfortunately, Italy has won the World Cup.
14. The following objection to Schiffer's account is also found in Hofweber (2006b).
15. A different attempt to explain this is King (2002) who holds that different syntactic arguments trigger different readings of the verb. King thereby aims to explain both the syntactic substitution failure, as well as the 'objectification effect' (see Moltmann 2003). I don't think that King's account can save the referentiality of that-clauses, but it helps to defend a weaker thesis: that that-clauses have propositions as semantic values. But this thesis, I argued above, is independent of the referentiality of that-clauses, and requires a specification of 'proposition' as something other than 'whatever that-clauses refer to.' For more on the substitution arguments against the thesis that that-clauses refer, see Moltmann (2003), which contains lots of interesting data. Moltmann's own theory inspired by these examples is that 'believes' expresses a multi-relation that has a variable number of relata, and that relates a believer to the constituents of the that-clause.
16. Thanks to Russell Dale and Gary Ostertag for many helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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