

# Schiffer's New Theory of Propositions

THOMAS HOFWEBER

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

## 1 The new theory

Every fifteen years or so Stephen Schiffer writes a state of the art book on the philosophy of language, with special emphasis on belief ascriptions, meaning, and propositions. The latest is his terrific new book *The Things We Mean*. It is again full of ideas, insights, arguments, expositions, and theories. For us, however, who believe that that-clauses are first and foremost clauses, not referring expressions, and that they thus do not refer to propositions or anything else, *The Things We Mean* brings home the news that our champion, the author of *Remnants of Meaning*, has, alas, crossed over to the dark side. Although Schiffer's earlier book defended one of the best versions of the no-reference theory, and brought up many of the issues that need to be addressed to defend such a theory, he now has recanted and switched sides. His new theory holds that propositions do exist after all, and that-clauses do refer to them. However, some of the motivation for the no-reference theory is incorporated into his new theory. In *Remnants of Meaning* one of the main reasons for rejecting the reference of that-clauses was the apparent impossibility to compositionally assign that-clauses their referents, and thus to give a compositional semantics for natural language. In *The Things We Mean* Schiffer still finds fault with any way to compositionally determine what things propositions are. But now the conclusion is not that they are not things, but that they are things that are not reducible to certain other things: they are sui generis entities. But they are not just any kind of sui generis entities, they are pleonastic entities. The use of the term "pleonastic" might be slightly confusing, though, since propositions according to the new theory are neither pleonastic in the sense of redundant, nor pleonastic in the sense of the pleonastic 'it', which suggests a no-reference theory. Rather they are pleonastic in a certain technical sense. Simply put, pleonastic entities are the ones that i) can be introduced by something-from-nothing transformations, and ii) the statement that there are such entities doesn't imply anything about other entities that wasn't implied before. The latter is only the spirit of Schiffer's official condition, which is spelled out in more detail using the notion of

a conservative extension. This official condition is somewhat technical, but also somewhat problematic. What is a conservative extension of what is difficult to predict, and simply because the entities we talk about are new it does not follow that the resulting theory is conservative. Conservativity depends on the details. For example, the something-from-nothing statements that introduce propositions also introduce truth, and while some metaphysically thin theories of truth are conservative, others are not. Whether adding certain basic facts about truth to a theory leads to greater deductive power depends on the details.<sup>1</sup> But as Schiffer says himself, it is the spirit that matters, not the detailed formulation of what precisely a pleonastic entity is. And the main idea is clear enough.

We who believe in the no-reference theory take the something-from-nothing transformations to indicate that we are not talking about new entities with them. Simply because we can move words around and apparently say the same thing again with more “singular terms” should not get us to think that we are talking about more entities. In the case of properties and propositions, just as in the case of

(1) I like to watch soccer on Saturdays.

and

(2) What I like to do on Saturdays is watch soccer.

we should not think that the corresponding statements are fundamentally semantically different, but that they are syntactically different, and that this difference has some explanation among which we could disagree.<sup>2</sup> But this is a fundamental disagreement between those who think that that-clauses refer, and those who think that they do not.

Schiffer motivates his account of pleonastic propositions from two different angles, corresponding to two different philosophical paradigms. These two motivations really are quite different, and it seems to me that one is better suited for Schiffer’s account than the other. The first case is the one of fictional characters. These are entities that are supposed to be created by our literary practices. Now, this case is really much more controversial than Schiffer makes it out to be in the book. Whether literature creates characters in any more robust sense than a remark can create tension in a room is up for debate. But if fictional characters come into existence by our literary practices, as Schiffer holds,<sup>3</sup> then they are really created. They only exist after the

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<sup>1</sup> See [Feferman, 1991].

<sup>2</sup> For my preferred account of how to understand the something-from-nothing transformations, see [Hofweber, 2005].

<sup>3</sup> See his remarks on the existence of the fictional character’s supervening on the writing of the fiction (p. 51), and the fictional character coming into existence (p. 59).

fiction was written. They don't exist necessarily. They don't exist at all times. They have the properties they have because of what the author did, and so on. None of this, as Schiffer says, holds for properties and propositions. These exist at all times, necessarily, they have their properties independently of us, and so on. But nonetheless, all of them, fictional characters, properties and propositions, are pleonastic entities. Here there is some tension.

The other paradigm is Frege's theory of numbers as logical objects, and the "syntactic priority thesis" with which it is usually formulated. This view is of course also controversial, but it seems to me that this second paradigm is really closer to Schiffer's conception of properties and propositions. Fictional creation is not a general account of the relationship between language and ontology. It is rather a controversial case about what we can do with words, and whether we can bring things into existence by writing fiction. But it is also this aspect of the fictional character story that does not carry over to propositions, and thus it doesn't seem such a good way to motivate the theory of the latter. On the other hand, the Fregean story about numbers as logical objects is a story about the relationship of language to ontology in general, one about the priority of the singular terms we use over what objects there are. It does carry over to propositions, and thus it seems to me to be the better fit for Schiffer's theory of propositions.

The general theory of pleonastic entities of course leaves room for controversy about cases. If there are pleonastic entities in general, wishdates clearly should not be seen as being among them, but natural numbers most likely should be seen as pleonastic entities, since they, too, have a something-from-nothing transformation. Other cases will be controversial: other mathematical objects, possible worlds, and so on. None of these seem to matter for the general theory of pleonastic entities, since one might be able to go either way on these cases and still hold onto the general theory. But there is one case of entities whose status as pleonastic entities might have a larger effect on the general theory.

## **2 Non-existent objects as pleonastic entities**

Schiffer's discussion of pleonastic entities focuses on fictional characters, properties and propositions, but there are many other kinds of things that seem to fit the bill just as well. Philosophers usually come in two kinds when it comes to these things. One kind rejects them and tries to find out what mistakes we make that lead us to think that there are such things. The other accepts them and tries to find out what mistakes we make in thinking there is a problem about them. Those who are in the second camp usually have some scruples when it comes to certain entities that only the most hardcore are willing to accept: non-existent objects. Schiffer does not discuss them in his new book, and I would like to ask him to clarify where he stands

entities. The answer to these questions is not at all clear. Non-existent objects have many, if not all, of the same same features as paradigmatic cases of pleonastic entities. They do not matter for the rest of what there is, and they will pass his conservative extension test, certainly in spirit, but likely also in letter. In addition, they can be introduced with something-from-nothing transformations. From basically any statement about what does not exist one can deduce conceptually what non-existent objects there are. To take one example:

- (3) a. No rejuvenating fountain exists.
- b. The Fountain of Youth does not exist.
- c. The Fountain of Youth is a non-existent object.
- d. Something is a non-existent object, to wit the Fountain of Youth.

To be sure, there are a number of differences between non-existent objects and propositions, but they are no greater than the differences between fictional characters and propositions. And there are many well known moves that one could make in denying one or another of these something-from-nothing inferences. But the same or comparable ones can be made in the something-from-nothing inferences for any of the other cases. For example, rejecting quantification in the case of non-existent objects, but accepting it in the case of propositions seems arbitrary and only motivated by philosophical prejudice, since there is no significant difference in ordinary language between

- (4) Everything he believes is false

and

- (5) Everything he is looking for doesn't exist.

In addition, the "to wit" inferences that introduce quantification over properties and propositions work for non-existent objects just as well, as they seem to for anything else. And the examples Schiffer gives to motivate an ontology of fictional entities carry over to non-existent objects as well. For example, Schiffer takes his example, on p. 53,

- (6) The fictional spy James Bond is a lot more famous than the fictional detective Adam Dalgleish.

as true, and as involving reference to fictional characters. But then the same seems to hold for

(7) The Fountain of Youth is a lot more famous than any real fountain.

Now, clearly there can be disagreement over the particular case given above, but the spirit of the case seems clear enough. And the reactions can be similar to the ones about the something-from-nothing transformations about propositions: either something in these inferences is mistaken, or if it is not, accepting them nonetheless does not bring with them an ontology of non-existent objects or propositions.<sup>4</sup> Or one could be at peace with them, and accept an ontology of non-existent objects as well as propositions. If something is wrong with the case for pleonastic non-existent objects it would be interesting to see what it is and why it does not carry over to propositions.

The trouble for Schiffer with accepting non-existent objects as pleonastic ones is that it then raises the question whether propositions and properties themselves are non-existent objects. It seems that from the something-from-nothing transformations alone you will get quantification over properties, but not necessarily that they exist, once we acknowledge that a distinction has to be drawn here. It will be a conceptual truth, given the theory, that there are propositions. But once we allow for non-existent objects this won't lead to a conceptual truth that propositions exist. If propositions indeed are non-existent entities then I am reminded of Schiffer's memorable quote where he discusses his earlier no-reference theory: "if that was the solution, then what the hell was the problem?" [Schiffer, 2003, 90]. Both the no-reference theory and the new theory (with non-existent objects) agree that propositions don't exist, they agree that we can nonetheless quantify over them, and so on. Once we go that far, it might have been better to stick with the no-reference theory.

### 3 Two kinds of substitution failure

As Schiffer notes, it is not clear how the no-reference theory of that-clauses is to be distinguished from one that takes them to refer, since any theory has to have an account of quantification that makes sense of quantification into that-clause positions. But there is one argument that is a favorite among the believers in the no-reference theory,<sup>5</sup> one that Schiffer discusses, but I think underestimates. This is the argument based on the well know cases of substitution failure. If that-clauses refer then it seems it should be possible to replace them with any other referring term that refers to the same proposition. And it seems that "that p" and "the proposition that p" should be co-referential if that-clauses refer at all. But such substitutions can fail. There can be a clear difference in truth value between

(8) Jane fears that Slovenia will win the World Cup.

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<sup>4</sup> This is what I believe to be the case. See [Hofweber, 2000].

<sup>5</sup> See [Bach, 1997].

and

- (9) Jane fears the proposition that Slovenia will win the World Cup.

The first is a fear about soccer, the second is a case of proposition phobia, fear of propositions themselves. The former kind of fear is common, the latter is rare, so these pairs of statements will often differ in truth value. One natural reaction would be to say that that-clauses do not refer, they are clauses, whereas the phrase “the proposition that p” is a noun phrase, not a clause, so no wonder they can’t be substituted for each other. But Schiffer is unimpressed. He holds that these examples are “based on a confusion about substitutivity *salva veritate*.” (p.93). In fact, he thinks there are clear counter-examples to this substitution principle, and thus no worries for the reference theory. Schiffer says:

For example, if Pavarotti is the greatest tenor, we still can’t substitute ‘the greatest tenor’ *salva veritate* 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.” (p. 93)

However, we should distinguish two kinds of substitution failure: one syntactic, one semantic. *Syntactic substitution failure* occurs when the replacement of a term in a syntactically wellformed sentence for a co-referential one makes that sentence syntactically non-wellformed. The above example with Pavarotti is one of syntactic substitution failure. *Semantic substitution failure* occurs when replacing a term in a syntactically wellformed sentence with a co-referential one leaves that sentence wellformed, but changes its truth value. Apparent cases of semantic substitution failure are Frege’s examples of substituting co-referential names in belief ascriptions.

Syntactic substitution failure is philosophically unproblematic. Simply because two terms refer to the same object does not mean, and shouldn’t be expected to mean, that they have the same syntactic features. For Schiffer’s Pavarotti example we have a fairly straightforward explanation, at least in outline, why the syntactic substitution failure occurs. The apposed phrase “the Italian singer” is headed by a determiner, “the”. If it is apposed to a phrase that is itself headed by a determiner we get ungrammaticality. The two determiners clash. That’s why it isn’t grammatical to say “the Italian singer the greatest tenor”, but it is grammatical to say “the Italian singer Pavarotti”, or “my hero the greatest tenor”, and so on. To be sure, why you can’t have two determiners in this way is a difficult question in syntax, and different syn-

tactic theories will have different answers in the details, but there is no philosophical puzzle here.

Not so with semantic substitution failure. If that-clauses refer to propositions then any other reference to the same proposition should be just as good. If it is not then maybe we have to conclude that that-clauses don't refer to propositions, and that we thus shouldn't expect that we can substitute for a clause which does not refer a term which does refer. The World Cup example is one of semantic substitution failure, if that-clauses refer. Schiffer is correct to point to syntactic substitution failure, but this does not help him explain semantic substitution failure, or to reject a substitution principle where grammaticality is preserved. In the World Cup example grammaticality is preserved, but the truth value changes. It is a case of semantic substitution failure, and thus an example that threatens to refute the reference theory.

Note that the no-reference theory, in outline, has a straightforward story about these cases. That-clauses do not refer, and when we say that A fears that p we are saying what the content of A's fear is, not what content the object of A's fear is. However, "fear" has besides a clausal reading also an objectual reading. People can be proposition phobic and they thus can fear contents themselves. But these are different, and preservation of truth value when moving from one to the other is not to be expected. Thus substitution failure still speaks in favor of the no-reference theory.

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