

## **Forthcoming in *Disputatio***

**The Things We Mean**, by Stephen Schiffer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, 362 pp.

Stephen Schiffer admits early on in his latest book that those who have followed his previous work will accuse him of displaying a sort of chutzpah, given his current position on meaning. Specifically, Schiffer has gone from systematically attacking his own (and every other) positive theory of meaning and recommending a “no-theory theory of meaning”,<sup>1</sup> to now introducing a new positive theory of meaning. However, he insists that the effrontery is actually quite mild and that, while he has changed his mind on certain issues, The Things We Mean should be considered more of a sequel to, rather than an abandonment of, Remnants of Meaning (p.9).

### **1 Overview**

The book covers an impressive amount of ground, and I will not treat every issue it pursues. However, before discussing a few specifics, a general overview of the book should provide a good sense of just what Schiffer is up to. He begins by endorsing what he considers the face-value theory of belief reports. In particular, the face-value theory is a relational account of belief reports, to the effect that reports of the form ‘A believes that S’ “are true just in case the referent of the ‘A’ term stands in the belief relation to the proposition to which the ‘that S’ term refers” (p.12). Of course, this opens the question of the nature of the propositions that believers are supposed to be related to. Concerns about compositionality drive Schiffer to argue that the things

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Schiffer 1972 & 1987. Note that all references to Schiffer 2003 will appear in the text, and will be given by page number alone.

we mean are “pleonastic propositions”; i.e., propositions “whose existence is secured by something-from-nothing transformations” (p.51).

Schiffer’s development of pleonastic propositions features an argument to the effect that endorsing both the face-value theory of belief reports and the compositionality hypothesis (roughly, the thesis that the referents of that-clauses are determined by their structure and the referents of their components) forces one to choose between Russellian and Fregean accounts of propositional structure. Of course, both Russellianism and Fregeanism face serious difficulties, and Schiffer is rather pessimistic about the chances of overcoming them. So much so that, paired with the motivation to maintain the face-value theory, Schiffer argues that we should abandon compositionality. The result is an acceptance of the idea that propositions are unstructured entities (i.e., they are not individuated by components of that-clauses). As Schiffer points out, one prominent account of unstructured propositions—Stalnaker’s (1984) account on which propositions are individuated by their possible worlds truth conditions—is not available to someone who wants to maintain anything like a robust form of the face-value theory, given that account’s well-known counter-intuitive consequences; e.g., the that-clauses specifying what is believed in ‘Trixie believes that every cypress is a cypress’ and ‘Trixie believes that  $219 * 305 = 66795$ ’ refer to the same proposition. The pleonastic account, on which propositions are referred to by the results of transformations that take us from, e.g., ‘Lassie is a dog’ to ‘That Lassie is a dog is true’ (p.71), is supposed to provide an account of unstructured propositions with a fineness of grain sufficient for cohering with the face-value theory.

Once the account of pleonastic propositions is in place, Schiffer employs it to address such topics as the knowledge of meaning, the mind-body problem, vagueness, moral discourse, and conditionals. The account of vagueness as a psychological notion is particularly important to

the discussions of moral discourse and conditionals, as Schiffer argues that moral propositions are indeterminate, as are a great many of the conditionals that are likely to be of interest to us. One clear virtue of the book is that it progresses in such a way that it reveals the often-overlooked connections that hold amongst many of the core philosophical problems.

I will now turn to Schiffer's handling of the face-value theory and vagueness. The former is at the basis of Schiffer's entire project and the latter is an example of one of the ways he attempts to use his theory of meaning to address central philosophical problems. While this approach leaves out his application of the theory of meaning to conditionals, two-dimensional modal semantics (especially in regard to its role in discussions of consciousness), and moral realism, I suspect that those issues will receive considerable attention elsewhere in the literature.

## **2 The status of the face-value theory**

According to Schiffer, the face-value theory of belief reports is "the default theory that must be defeated if it's not to be accepted" (p.11). Much of the face-value theory's plausibility stems from the intuition that it provides the best account for the validity of inferences such as (p.12):

Harold believes everything that Fiona says.  
Fiona says that there is life on Venus  
So, Harold believes that there is life on Venus.

Schiffer is no doubt correct that such cases of the logical behavior of belief reports give the appearance that belief is a state that relates a believer to something that is believed; viz., whatever it is to which that-clauses refer. And, of course, the most natural way of understanding the referents of that-clauses is that they are propositions. Observations of this sort have significantly contributed to the widespread appeal of relational accounts of belief. For those that are onboard with the relationalist account so far, there still remains a very thorny issue of just

what propositions are. Not just any account of propositions will do, and one constraint Schiffer's approach places on an adequate account of propositions is that it squares with the face-value theory. As was noted earlier, Schiffer's rejections of compositionality, Russellianism, Fregeanism, and possible worlds semantics are driven by this constraint, and the pleonastic account is introduced specifically to meet this constraint.

The pleonastic account is likely to draw heavy fire from those who would agree with Schiffer about the relational character of belief, but who are more sympathetic to Russellian or Fregean accounts of propositions. While many of those responses would likely consist of defenses of a specific form of one of the approaches Schiffer rejects, critics will probably also target his appeal to fictional entities to ground the discussion of pleonastic entities, on which the plausibility of his entire project depends. Schiffer is adamant that his treatment of fictional characters and other things that he counts as pleonastic entities (viz., properties and propositions) makes them metaphysically quite slim (cf. pp.59, 62-63,71), but it is also clear that he is exceedingly liberal in just how many get included in our ontology. Moreover, Schiffer's claims that fictional entities "exist in their own right" and that fictional character names can figure as genuinely referring terms in truth-evaluable statements, are anything but metaphysically conservative (p.51). The ontology of fictional entities is a murky area and I will leave it to others to pursue these matters more thoroughly. However, it is worth noting here that Schiffer does not at all address legitimate competing accounts that make no such ontological commitment to fictional entities or cognitive theories that are simply neutral about what, if anything, corresponds to our pretending use of names; e.g., Walton's (1990) pretense account. Rather, the argument for his hypostatizing treatment of fictional entities consists entirely of an appeal to certain intuitions about it being "clear that it is a conceptual truth that using the name 'n' in

writing a fiction creates the fictional character  $\underline{n}$ ” (p.53). I must confess that not only do I not find these issues anywhere near as clear as Schiffer claims they are, I find myself not having any useful intuitions at all about what is or is not created by the fictional use of names. Considering that the ontological payoff of something-from-nothing transformations that is so crucial to Schiffer’s pleonastic account of propositions turns on the same sort of consideration of what is supposed to be a conceptual truth, it is not unreasonable to have expected Schiffer to do more to motivate his account of fictional entities.

Another possible target for attack would be Schiffer’s use of the prima facie appeal of the face-value theory. While the idea that beliefs (and other propositional attitudes) are relations of a certain kind between a subject and a semantically-evaluable entity referred to by the that-clause used to report the belief is as close to philosophical orthodoxy as one can get, it is not without its critics. One of the more interesting alternative accounts is that given by Robert Matthews (1994), according to which propositional attitude predicates are to be treated as measurement predicates. On Matthews’ account, similar to how certain abstract entities (e.g., numbers) fix a location on a measurement scale that is used to specify (e.g.) an object’s temperature, propositions simply index certain psychological states of the subject to which they are attributed. In neither ‘Earl believes that it is raining’ nor ‘The turkey has a temperature of 180 degrees Celsius’ is there a relation between the subject and an abstract entity picked out by the predicate; in the former the proposition that it is raining and in the latter the number 180. This is not to suggest that Matthews is right and Schiffer is wrong about the nature of belief. However, independently of what we should make of Matthews’ measurement theory of propositional attitudes, one of the more important points he develops in presenting his account should lead us to very cautiously approach Schiffer’s claim about the face-value theory being “the default that must be defeated if

it's not to be accepted" (p.11). Schiffer's extreme confidence in the face-value theory is largely based on it being the "most straightforward" way of accounting for the validity of the sort of inferences noted earlier. Yet, even if Schiffer happens to be right about belief being relational, it seems far too hasty to draw strong metaphysical conclusions about the nature of belief based simply on reflection on the logical behavior of the language we use to talk about beliefs. As Matthews notes, it is an empirical issue whether the propositional attitudes themselves actually possess the sort of rich structure found in our linguistic representations of them (Matthews 1994, p.144). There simply is no a priori guarantee that our belief reports reflect all and only the actual structure of the states they are about. This issue is completely passed over by Schiffer, as well as a great many other philosophers. It is interesting to note that Schiffer's own characterization of his view makes it somewhat amenable to re-interpretation as a measurement theory, were one to put aside its substantive commitments regarding the nature of belief; cf. p.302.

### **3 Vagueness as a psychological notion**

Schiffer offers an account of vagueness and indeterminacy as a psychological, rather than semantic or epistemic, notion. This is certainly an interesting proposal and seems like a promising way to approach many of the standard philosophical puzzles about vagueness. The idea is that vagueness arises from a certain kind of partial belief; viz., vagueness-related partial belief (VPB). VPB is to be considered distinct from a more familiar form of partial belief, which Schiffer labels standard partial belief (SPB). SPBs arise from ignorance and their behavior satisfies the standard Kolmogorov axioms of probability theory. Schiffer is explicit that VPBs do not come about due to uncertainty, that we could not have VPBs if we had a perfectly precise language, and that VPBs cannot under any idealization be identified with subjective probability

(pp.201-202). The account we get from Schiffer is that instead of tracking borderline cases, borderline cases themselves constitutively depend on VPBs, which is what makes vagueness a psychological notion.

The notion of a VPB is illustrated with an example in which Sally, a rational speaker of English, is in an ideal position to observe Tom Cruise, who is quite non-bald, have his hair plucked out, one hair at a time. The “experiment” begins with Sally being completely certain that Tom is not bald. As the plucking goes on, Sally will begin to “have an ever so slightly diminished confidence” that Tom is not bald (p.203). The plucking continues, to the point where Sally’s belief that Tom isn’t bald has fallen from its initial degree of 1 to .5, and her belief that he is bald has risen from its initial degree of zero to .5. Sally is in ideal epistemic circumstances, so her partial belief cannot be a reflection of any ignorance on her part, and we are in no position to identify her partial beliefs with subjective probability. Hence her partial beliefs about Tom’s baldness are VPBs. How do we come to know the degree to which Sally believes that Tom is or is not bald? Schiffer’s response is that Sally’s “qualified judgments about Tom’s baldness ... express partial beliefs” (p.203).

Two concerns come to mind about Schiffer’s proposal about vagueness, neither of which I take to form a decisive objection, but both of which demand further defense of it. The first has to do with Schiffer’s handling of the hair-plucking case. For one thing, it is not at all clear how we would accurately map Sally’s qualified claims onto degrees of partial belief, so it would be helpful if Schiffer further addressed how we should approach that issue. In connection with this, it is far from obvious that we should expect someone in Sally’s position to answer as she does, or to answer at all. Perhaps instead of qualified assertion, what we might get from someone in Sally’s position is a refusal to answer until Tom becomes an obvious case of a bald person,

maybe even an avowal of ignorance; e.g., “I just don’t know.” What would make Sally’s response, rather than that of someone who refused to make any assertion at all until matters are clear, the appropriate one? Schiffer does not tackle this sort of question, but it seems especially pressing in the light of the fundamental role that VPBs play in the account of vagueness.

The second concern amounts to a request for empirical support for what is a decidedly empirical claim. If there are such things as VPBs and vagueness is a psychological notion, psychological research should be highly relevant to Schiffer’s account. Unfortunately, Schiffer does not cite any empirical findings in support of his proposal. An interesting follow-up project would be to investigate what parts of the psychological literature might bear on the central claims of Schiffer’s account, and to consider what sorts of experiments might yield confirming or disconfirming results.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The Things We Mean is not an easy read and relies at key points on controversial assumptions, while neglecting empirical issues that are relevant to its central claims. In the end, it is very difficult to know what to make of the major claims of the book, because it is unclear what principled grounds we might have to accept them. I suspect that Schiffer’s handling of these issues will receive considerable discussion, which perhaps will help reveal the support for the book’s central theses.

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