Review: Stephen Schiffer, *The Things We Mean*, Oxford University Press 2003

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Stephen Schiffer's latest book is on *the things we mean* – somewhat surprising, given the tenor of his last book *Remnants of Meaning*. Schiffer explicates the interrelation thus: "My last book, *Remnants of Meaning*, which was a refutation of my first book, *Meaning,* concluded with the 'no-theory theory of meaning', the claim that there could be no correct positive theory of meaning. Now I'm introducing a third book whose offering is a positive theory of meaning, What kind of chutzpah is this? Only a mild kind, actually. This book is, at least in spirit, more of a sequel to *Remnants of Meaning* than an apostasy of it…" (9)

The book covers a remarkable range of topics. I will first very briefly summarize all eight chapters and then focus on the first three chapters and on the fifth chapter. The first chapter contains a richly detailed discussion of two contrasting views on propositions: the Russellian and the Fregean view. Schiffer thereby sets the stage for his own account of the nature of propositions which is further developed in the second chapter. The third chapter takes up the question of what it is to know the meaning of an expression and whether there are meanings in the first place. In the fourth chapter, Schiffer addresses a couple of issues and problems he has been preoccupied with for quite a while now, namely the actual-language-relation problem and related problems and the issue of compositionality. The fifth chapter develops a subtle view of vagueness and indeterminacy. In chapter six, Schiffer discusses a problem in connection with moral judgements, and a similar problem with indicative conditionals is discussed in chapter seven. The problem is that there are reasons for thinking that there are moral and indicative-conditional propositions respectively and also reasons for thinking that there aren't. In the moral case, Schiffer concludes that while there are moral propositions, none of them is determinately true. He takes it that for moral propositions to be determinately true there have to be moral principles that are knowable a priori - unfortunately, there are no such moral principles. His argument turns crucially on his claim that, whatever moral principle someone happens to believe a priori, it is always possible that someone else in a relevantly similar epistemic situation fails to believe the principle. Things are somewhat different in the case of conditionals, for at least some conditional propositions are determinately true and some

are determinately false. But again, there is a catch, for all conditionals whose false antecedents don't metaphysically or physically entail their consequents are indeterminate. Moreover, in this case, as in the moral case, there are serious glitches in our conceptual practices – a recurring theme in the book. The topic of chapter eight is the role of propositions in information and explanation. Schiffer has it that we often exploit someone's propositional attitudes as a source of information about the world: I come to know that p because I come to know that you believe that p. We also use the world as a source of information about the propositional attitudes of others. From the fact that p is obviously the case I can (defeasibly) infer that you believe that p. Secondly, we often make use of propositional attitude ascriptions to explain and predict behaviour, as when we use what we know about someone's beliefs and desires in order to explain what he did or to predict what he will do. And, not surprisingly, Schiffer takes pleonastic propositions to be perfectly suited to serve in those propositional attitude ascriptions. So let me start by taking a closer look at his account of the nature of propositions.

At the beginning of chapter one, Schiffer explains that a „major theme of this book will be that all notions of linguistic and mental content are ultimately to be explained in terms of the things we mean and believe, and that these fundamental units of content are propositions of a certain kind, which, for reasons that will emerge, I call *pleonastic propositions*." [11] Part of his reason for thinking that the things we mean and believe are propositions is that he accepts the Face-Value-Theory of belief reports – reports such as "A believes that there is life on Venus". According to the Face-Value-Theory, the verb "to believe" is a two-place predicate whose argument places are to be occupied by singular terms. In the above report, the singular term "A" refers to A and the singular term "that there is life on Venus" refers to *that there is life on Venus.* And *that there is life on Venus* is a proposition. Now given that the referents of that-clauses are propositions, the next question is as to their nature. According to Schiffer, propositions are abstract, mind- and language-independent entities. But more needs to be said: Are they structured or unstructured? And if they are structured, what are the components supposed to be? He discusses two opposing views: According to the Russellian, propositions are structured entities whose basic components are the objects and properties our beliefs are about. The Fregean, on the other hand, has it that the components are not the objects and properties themselves but rather concepts thereof. But, as Schiffer convincingly argues, both the Russellian and the Fregean face a couple of more or less devastating problems. So he develops, in the second chapter,

his own account of the nature of propositions - thought to complement the Face-Value-Theory.

According to his own account, propositions are pleonastic entities. There are other kinds of pleonastic entities, e.g. properties and fictional entities. Consider first the case of fictional entities. Schiffer quotes the first lines of James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

> Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed.

In using the name „Buck Mulligan" Joyce doesn't even try to refer to anyone but rather pretends to refer to a man so that he can say something about him. This is what Schiffer calls the pretending use of the name, a use that "should create the existence of something whose name is 'Buck Mulligan', thereby making it possible to use the name in a genuinely referential way in true statements about that referent". [50/51] So once the fictional character has come into existence through the pretending use, it is henceforth possible to use the name in order to refer to the fictional character. This second use of the name as a genuinely referential term is what Schiffer calls the hypostatizing use of fictional names. Now he points out that from

> Joyce wrote a novel in which he uses 'Buck Mulligan' in the pretending way.

one may validly infer

> Joyce created the fictional character Buck Mulligan.

The inference is a *something-from-nothing transformation* which takes one "from a statement in which no reference is made to a thing of a certain kind (in this case, to a fictional entity) to a statement in which there is reference to a thing of that kind. 'Pleonastic' entities are entities whose existence is secured by something-from-nothing transformations." [51]

But do we have to commit ourselves to the existence of fictional entities in order to make sense of fictional discourse? And even if we agree to say that fictional entities exist, do they exist in the way that properties or propositions exist – for that is what it takes to get a homogeneous account of pleonastic entities? Within Schiffer's account, these questions take on a special significance, since his account of propositions as pleonastic entities seems to be (partly)

motivated by modelling it on the case of fictional entities. But the motivation is only as good as his account of fictional entities is.

Now properties are another kind of pleonastic entity. They too give rise to something-from-nothing transformations. Take the following example:

(1)   Lassie is a dog.
(2)   Lassie has the property of being a dog. [61]

Again, the inference is valid, according to Schiffer. He takes it to be a conceptual truth that every dog has the property of being a dog. But then, how can we come to know such a truth? How, that is, can we know anything about properties? Aren't they mind and language independent abstract entities, doomed to be causally inert? Here, Schiffer claims, as in the case of fictional entities, it is enough to engage in a certain linguistic practice (the hypostatizing use in the case of fictional entities), for to adopt the practice is to have the concept of a property (and of a fictional character respectively). But that also means that there is nothing more to properties than what is determined by our linguistic practice: „As regards the principles by which those properties are individuated, it means that if the question of individuation is left unsettled by the practices constitutive of the concept of a property, then that question has no determinate answer." [63]

Unfortunately, the concept of a property is apt to cause trouble. Just take *the property of being a property that doesn't instantiate itself.* According to Schiffer that only shows that the concept of a property - like so many other philosophically interesting concepts - has a glitch. But if Schiffer concedes that, then one might wonder whether the alleged conceptual truths involving the concept are really worth their salt. Our practice obviously doesn't manage to determine a concept that is not susceptible to paradox. But should we put much confidence on a concept which is obviously paradox-prone to provide us with conceptual truth, especially in those cases where there is at best an 'unhappy-face solution' - as Schiffer calls it (see below) - to the paradox the concept gives rise to? And the point generalizes. There doesn't seem to be a guarantee that our linguistic practice manages to determine any glitch-free concept. But then, what reasons do we have for thinking that there are any conceptual truths at all?

Now, propositions too are pleonastic entities. The corresponding something-from-nothing transformation goes like this:

(3)   Lassie is a dog.

(4)   That Lassie is a dog is true. [71]

Sentence (4) contains a singular term, 'that Lassie is a dog', which refers to the proposition that Lassie is a dog, but which doesn't occur in (3). But the way that-clauses are related to propositions differs in crucial respects from the way singular terms are usually related to their referents. [Cf. 72]. For example, in order to evaluate an utterance of the form *a R b*, we usually first identify the referents of *a* and *b*. Once the referents are identified, we can ask whether the former stand in relation *R* to the latter. But things are different when it comes to propositions. "In a belief report, we first have contextually determined criteria of evaluation. And then those criteria determine the proposition to which the that-clause refers." [74] Compare the following two sentences:

(7)   Lois believes that Superman flies.
(6)   Lois believes that Clark Kent flies.

We know that the one sentence may be true and the other false. And we take this to show that the proposition that Superman flies is not the same proposition as the proposition that Clark Kent flies. [Cf. 77] Schiffer holds that the referent of a that-clause in a belief report is contextually determined in that the interests and assumptions of speaker and audience help determine the report's criteria of evaluation. The criteria in turn determine the proposition expressed. In other words, the referent of a that-clause in a belief report is determined "by what the speaker and audience mutually take to be essential to the truth-value of the belief report." [81].

   Accordingly, two belief reports may differ in truth value simply due to the fact that speaker and hearers take different things to enter into the determination of the respective criteria of evaluation. And given that not only the things we believe are propositions but the things we say and mean too, the same holds good for saying reports and assertions more generally. Also, it seems possible for two tokens of one and the same belief report to differ in truth-value - if what is taken to be essential for the one to be true differs in relevant respects from what is taken to be essential for the other to be true. Take again sentence (6). It may be true in a context where the participants take it to be *in*essential to the truth of the report that Lois knows that Superman is Clark Kent, while in another context where the participants take it to be essential to the truth of the report that Lois knows that Superman is Clark Kent, (6) may be false.

Consequently, propositions are *very* fine-grained. They cannot be individuated by means of a simple that-clause since the referent of the that-clause is contextually determined and therefore subject to contextual variation. There is simply no such thing as, say, *the* proposition that Superman flies. So while propositions are easy to come by on Schiffer's account they are hard to get a firm grip on. Consequently, one may well doubt that propositions, being so hard to pin down, are best suited for the role they are supposed to play in information and common sense explanations.

In the third chapter, Schiffer is concerned with the question of what is it to know what an expression means. (He takes it that this is the right question to ask if one wants to find out what meanings are.) A suggestion that comes to mind is that to know what an expression *e* means is to know that *e* means … - where the lacuna has to be filled in appropriately. [Cf. 100] But Schiffer doubts that this can be done in all cases. Competent speaker know what "Stop complaining", "That's funny" or "and" means, but how is the lacuna to be filled in here? [Cf. 101] So he takes a different line. He first notes that a difference in meaning between two sentences can be due either to a difference in propositional content or to a difference in the speech act those sentences are commonly used to perform. Accordingly, one might think that to know what a sentence means amounts to two things: First, one has to know what kind of speech act the sentence is commonly used to perform – given that the sentence is used literally. And secondly, one has to know what propositional content a literal utterance of the sentence would have. But Schiffer questions whether all this knowledge is really needed for language processing. So he ends up endorsing the following claim: A given subject x knows what a sentence s of language L means "iff x is in (or is disposed to be in) a token of a state-type capable of occupying the knowledge-of-meaning role in x's understanding of a literal L utterance of s." [116].

But for all that, one might associate a sentence with an ordered pair <A, P>, "where A is the kind of speech act that must be performed in a literal utterance of the sentence, and P is the kind of propositional content that speech act must have." [112] An ordered pair thus associated with a sentence S represents what Schiffer calls the character* of sentence S. But characters* are not Kaplanian characters; they don't determine propositional content - they only constrain it. Nor is Schiffer trying to develop a two-dimensional semantics. (He discusses a version of a two dimensional semantics which closely resembles David Chalmers theory. But he takes it to be just "a notational variant of a familiar Russellian theory." [143]) Moreover, characters* aren't meanings as they don't provide

substitution instances for the above schema according to which to know what *e* means is to know that *e* means …. for appropriate filling-ins of the lacuna. But for all that, characters* are as close to meanings as we can get, for "an expression has meaning just in case it has a character*, and two expressions have the same meaning just in case they have the same character*". [118]

But one might wonder whether the notion of character* is fit to play the meaning-ersatz-role. One worry concerns the conception of a literal utterance and of literal meaning more generally, given that what we mean and believe is contextually determined by what speaker and audience take to be essential to the truth value of the respective meaning- and belief-reports. Now it is reasonable to suppose that what speaker and audience will take to be essential is constrained by the literal meaning of the words used. And Schiffer has it that the meaning of a word is its contribution to the content of the sentences it might figure in, i.e. the propositions expressed. Yet the propositions expressed in an utterance (i.e. what is meant) are, again, determined by what speakers take to be essential to the truth value of the respective meaning-reports. But then we have come full circle. So an independent account of literal meaning seems to be required.

Schiffer then turns to the issue of vagueness and indeterminacy. Most of our expressions are vague. So pending an account of vagueness a theory of meaning is incomplete. But vagueness is only one source of indeterminacy. There are other forms of indeterminacy, e.g. those infecting moral or conditional propositions (the topic of chapter six and seven). Now one problem with vague terms is that they are paradox-prone. A paradox is made up out of mutually incompatible propositions, where each proposition taken on its own may seem quite plausible. According to Schiffer, some paradoxes have a happy-face solution, others have only an unhappy-face solution. A happy-face solution "would identify the odd guy out …in a way that removed its patina of plausibility, so that we would never again be taken in by it". [68] A solution is an unhappy-face solution if it is not possible to find the 'culprit'. And if a paradox lacks a happy-face solution, it does so because there is a glitch in the concept or concepts that give rise to the paradox, according to Schiffer. To say that there is a glitch is not to say that the concept is logically inconsistent, though, as we don't take the conflicting aspects to provide necessary conditions for the application. But the concept "nevertheless pulls one in opposing directions without there being anything else in the concept or elsewhere to resolve that tug-o-war". [197] Now vague terms are especially susceptible to the sorites paradox, as the following example shows:

(1) A person with \$50 million is rich
(2) $\forall n$ (a person with \$n is rich $\rightarrow$ a person with \$n-1¢ is also rich) – i.e. you can't remove someone from the ranks of the rich by taking 1¢ form her fortune.
(3) $\therefore$ A person with only 37¢ is rich. [179]

Schiffer discusses some contemporary accounts of vagueness, e.g. proposals made by Timothy Williamson, Hartry Field, Paul Horwich or Dorothy Edgington, and supervaluationist as well as Łukasiewiczian accounts employing a degree-theoretic notion of truth. These accounts either endorse bivalence or they are variants of what he calls, following Crispin Wright, third-possibility views of indeterminacy. These views treat indeterminacy as a third kind of status distinct from truth and falsity. Schiffer rejects these views and approvingly quotes Wright as emphasizing that it is an "absolutely basic datum that in general borderline cases come across as hard cases: as cases where we are baffled to choose between conflicting verdicts about which polar verdict applies, rather than as cases which we recognize as enjoying a status inconsistent with both." [Wright 2001, 69-70, in C. Wright: "On Being in a Quandary: Relativism, Vagueness, Logical Revisionism", *Mind* 110, 45-98]

According to Schiffer, vagueness is neither a semantic nor an epistemic notion but rather a psychological notion. He attempts to explain vagueness in terms of partial belief. To this end, he distinguishes two kinds of partial belief: standard partial beliefs (SPB) and vagueness-related partial beliefs (VPB). If we don't mind idealizing a bit, SPBs can be understood as subjective probabilities, obeying the axioms of probability theory. They measure uncertainty, ignorance. Things are different with VPBs. Schiffer gives an example to illustrate the point:

Tom Cruise has agreed to have his hairs plucked one by one. Sally is watching. At the beginning she is certain that Tom is not bald. But at some point she begins to judge with less confidence. She starts making qualified assertions. And qualified assertions indicate partial beliefs. So Sally may be ascribed partial beliefs. But does she have SPBs? She is not exactly uncertain. Nor do her beliefs about Tom's hair condition obey the axioms of probability theory. Rather, she is ambivalent or torn. She is in conflict. And "our being conflicted in this way is the essence of a VPB, VPB is the psychological state induced by the conceptual conflict." [225] So Sally's partial beliefs that Tom is bald are VPBs. And Schiffer claims that it is a necessary condition for x to be a borderline

case of being F that someone could have a VPB (formed under ideal epistemic conditions) that x is F.

Now someone might object that while a VPB may be the appropriate *reaction* to a borderline case, it cannot be what *makes* it a borderline case in the first place. VPBs cannot constitute vagueness, or so the objection goes. But if VPBs do not constitute vagueness but are only appropriate responses to borderlines cases, then what exactly are they responsive to? To a special ontological status the borderline case of being F does enjoy? If that were so, a third-possibility view of indeterminacy were correct. Yet again, these views fail to do justice to the basic datum that "borderline cases come across as hard cases" and not as cases that enjoy a special status other than truth or falsity. So according to Schiffer, it is rather the case that "there is nothing more to the essence of a property than is determined for it by our property-hypostatizing linguistic and conceptual practices. It is a *primitive and underived* feature of the conceptual role of each concept of a vague property that under certain conditions we form VPBs involving that concept, and *it is in this that vagueness consists*". [212]

Finally, how does Schiffer handle the sorites paradox? He sees himself as committed to holding that the second premise, the sorites premise, is unacceptable. It is not determinately false, though, but indeterminate. Moreover, it is indeterminate whether the inference is valid, i.e. whether modus ponens is a valid rule of inference. But, for all that, "[c]lassical logic is for the most part a perfectly good logic even for vague language, since to say that a claim is *vague* isn't to claim that it is *indeterminate*…and the vast majority of vague claims aren't indeterminate". [230/231]

Of course there is much more to *The Things We Mean* than has been summarized here. The book provides a densely argued, multi-layered treatment of a wide range of issues. And it is written at an awesome level of philosophical ingenuity and esprit. The account of the pleonastic nature of propositions and properties, e.g., is as inventive as it is intriguing. It obviates the need for a full- or rather overblown metaphysical theory of those entities. There is nothing more to them than is determined by our linguistic practice. And Schiffer's account of vagueness and indeterminacy as a psychological phenomenon, a kind of partial belief that results from a conceptual conflict, provides a very interesting and promising alternative to the 'traditional' views. It allows us to take a fresh look at the problem.

But the book is also very provocative. Some will be uneasy about the idea that many central philosophical concepts have a glitch. Doesn't that mean that our conceptual grip on the word is seriously impoverished? Also, will not the

properties determined by those concepts be deficient too - and can we make sense of this idea at all? Others may find the claim that there are no determinately true moral propositions and hardly any determinately true conditional propositions of interest hard to swallow. So Schiffer's account seem to compel a radical departure from classical views. Future discussion will show whether that is justified.

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