

**PROPOSITIONS: WHAT THEY COULD
AND WHAT THEY COULD NOT BE**

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Abstract

I defend the Fregean model of propositions: propositions are (a) the referents of that-clauses and (b) structured entities made of concepts. Schiffer (2003) has presented a group of arguments against the Fregean model and advanced an alternative view: propositions are unstructured pleonastic entities. My purpose is twofold: (i) to counter each of his arguments sketching the guidelines for a theory of concepts as basic constituents of propositions; (ii) to maintain that the notion of pleonastic entity is not robust enough for claiming the existence of propositions.

1. Schiffer (2003 pp. 24-27) presents a group of arguments against the Fregean model of that-clauses. The Fregean model holds three main theses:

- (A) That-clauses are singular terms standing for propositions.
- (B) Propositions are structured entities determined by the referents of the expressions forming the that-clauses and by their syntactic structure.
- (C) Expressions occurring in that-clauses have concepts as referents.

Schiffer attacks the Fregean model by the following arguments:

- (1) We lack a theory of concepts as basic constituents of propositions.
- (2) The Fregean model does not explain how propositions get their truth-conditions.
- (3) There are cases where it seems that some singular terms occurring in that-clauses cannot but refer to their ordinary referents. Schiffer gives the following example: your husband's brother says to you: "I believe I am falling in love with you". Schiffer holds that it is *obvious*¹ that the indexical "I" occurring in the that-clause refers to your husband's brother and not to a concept of him.

¹ Cf. Schiffer (2003 p. 25).

(4) If expressions occurring in that-clauses have concepts as referents, then in (s) “John believes that Fido barks” the name “Fido” refers to the concept of Fido. Hence, if Mary asserts (s), she refers to the concept of Fido, which is the concept by which John thinks of Fido. The Fregean model must explain by which concept Mary thinks of the concept by which John thinks of Fido. Following this line of reasoning we admit a hierarchy of concepts: concepts, concepts of concepts, concepts of concepts of concepts and so on. The Fregean model must explain what are such concepts and what it is to grasp all of them.

(5) Sometimes reference to concepts seems highly implausible. Consider the following sentence: (s*) “Everyone who visits New York believes that New York is noisy”. The second occurrence of “New York” refers to the concept of New York. But it should be a concept shared by all people who visit New York and it is very unlikely that all those people share the same concept of it.

(6) The sixth argument goes like follows:

i) If the Fregean model is correct, then (a) “Fido” occurs in “Ralph believes that Fido is a dog” as a singular term whose referent is a concept of Fido.

ii) If (a), then the following inference (Inf) is valid:

(Inf)

Ralph believes that Fido is a dog.

$\therefore \exists x(x \text{ is a concept} \ \& \ \text{Ralph believes that } x \text{ is a dog}).$

iii) But the inference is not valid; given the truth of the premise, the conclusion is also true only in the unlikely event that Ralph mistakes a concept for a dog.

iv) \therefore The Fregean model is not true.

2. In this section I shall respond to arguments (3), (4) and (6). I shall start by commenting on argument (6). I take the premise of (Inf) to be ambiguous. It allows for a *de dicto* reading and for a *de re* reading. My claim is that in both cases argument (6) is not sound. If we construe

the premise of the inference as a *de dicto* belief, then step iii) is false. If we construe the same premise as a *de re* belief, then step i) is false.

If we construe the premise as a *de dicto* belief, then “Ralph believes that Fido is a dog” is true if and only if Ralph stands in the believing relation to the proposition that Fido is a dog. According to the Fregean model, this proposition is formed by the concept of Fido and the concept of being a dog. The logical form of the premise of (Inf) is:

$$\text{Bel}(\text{Ralph}, \langle C_{\text{Fido}}, C_{\text{being a dog}} \rangle).$$

The logical form of the conclusion of (Inf) is:

$$\exists x(x \text{ is a concept and Bel}(\text{Ralph}, \langle x, C_{\text{being a dog}} \rangle)).$$

The conclusion is true if and only if there is a concept that, together with the concept of being a dog, constitutes the proposition that Ralph believes. In quantifying in that-clauses of *de dicto* beliefs, variables range over concepts. Therefore, according to the Fregean model, if it is true that Ralph believes *de dicto* that Fido is a dog, it is true that there is a concept that, together with the concept of being a dog, constitutes the proposition that Ralph believes. The advocate of the Fregean model can reply to Schiffer’s charge by the following counter-argument:

i*) If the Fregean model is correct, then (a) “Fido” occurs in “Ralph believes that Fido is a dog” as a singular term whose referent is a concept of Fido.

ii*) If (a), then the following inference (Inf*) is valid:

(Inf*)

Ralph believes that Fido is a dog.

$$\therefore \exists x(x \text{ is a concept and Bel}(\text{Ralph}, \langle x, C_{\text{being a dog}} \rangle)).$$

iii*) The inference is valid.

iv*) Schiffer’s argument is not sound.

To achieve his goal, Schiffer should require that in quantifying in that-clauses of *de dicto* beliefs variables range over the ordinary referents of expressions. Only in this case the conclusion of (Inf) would be false unless Ralph mistakes a concept for a dog. We agree with Schiffer that such a mistake would be very unlikely, and consequently the inference would be invalid. But in this case, Schiffer's argument would assume the rejection of claim (C) of the Fregean model and would be question-begging.

Matters are different if we construe the premise of the inference as a *de re* belief. A *de re* belief is a two place relation between a subject and the object he thinks of. By quantifying in that-clauses of *de re* beliefs, variables range over the ordinary referents of expressions, and not over concepts. Construed as a *de re* belief, the premise Ralph believes that Fido is a dog turns into:

(*) Ralph believes of Fido that it is a dog.

whose logical form is:

Believing to be a dog(Ralph, Fido).

In (*) the proper name "Fido" stands for Fido and not for the concept of Fido. In (**) the variable "x" must range over things that are ordinary referents of singular terms.

(**) $\exists x(\text{Ralph believes of } x \text{ that it is a dog}).$

And the logical form of (**) is:

$\exists x(\text{Believing to be a dog}(\text{Ralph}, x)).$

The advocate of the Fregean semantics is not committed to denying that in (*) "Fido" stands for Fido. He has the resources to spell out the believing-to-be-a-dog relation between Ralph and Fido in terms of a *de dicto* belief: Ralph believes of Fido that it is a dog if and only if the proposition $\langle C_{\text{Fido}}, C_{\text{being a dog}} \rangle$ is a mode of presentation (MP) of the state of affairs $\langle \text{Fido}, \text{being a dog} \rangle$ and Ralph believes such proposition. The logical form of the sentence "Ralph believes of Fido that it is a dog" is:

$(MP(\langle C_{\text{Fido}}, C_{\text{being a dog}} \rangle, \langle \text{Fido}, \text{being a dog} \rangle)) \text{ and } Bel(\text{Ralph}, \langle C_{\text{Fido}}, C_{\text{being a dog}} \rangle))$:

The logical form of the sentence “ $\exists x(\text{Ralph believes of } x \text{ that it is a dog})$ ” is:

$\exists x \exists y (MP(\langle y, C_{\text{being a dog}} \rangle, \langle x, \text{being a dog} \rangle) \text{ and } Bel(\text{Ralph}, \langle y, C_{\text{being a dog}} \rangle))$.

This is David Kaplan’s (1969) proposal to account for *de re* beliefs in terms of *de dicto* beliefs, which has been attacked by Tyler Burge (1977). Burge’s objection to Kaplan is that *de re* beliefs are irreducible to *de dicto* beliefs. In order to achieve such reduction, we would need Fregean senses expressed by demonstratives and indexicals and, according to Burge, there cannot be such senses. I agree with Burge that we need such senses, but I disagree with him on the impossibility of having them². Here I will not defend Kaplan’s proposal, but only stress that Schiffer’s argument is not effective. It is true that if Burge is right, then the reading of “Ralph believes that Fido is a dog” as a *de re* belief poses a problem to the Fregean model. But Schiffer’s argument *per se* is silent on whether Burge’s criticism of Kaplan’s proposal succeeds.

Let us move to argument (3). It is not easy to understand what objection Schiffer has in mind. He says that when your husband’s brother asserts the sentence “I believe that I am falling in love with you” it is obvious that the indexical “I”, which occurs in the that-clause, has your husband’s brother as referent and not a concept of him. Perhaps, what Schiffer has in mind is that your husband’s brother wants to communicate some information about himself and not about a concept. Surely, your husband’s brother thinks of himself when he grasps the proposition expressed by (e) “I am falling in love with you” and speaks of himself when he utters that sentence. He continues to think and speak of himself when he grasps the proposition expressed by (e*) “I believe I am falling in love with you”. The Fregean model does not need to question this much. The interesting point is to explain what enables your husband’s brother to think of himself: he is able to think of himself because the proposition expressed by (e), which he grasps, is formed by concepts and one of them is a concept of him. So the truth-condition of the proposition expressed by (e*) is that your husband’s brother stands in the believing relation to the proposition expressed by (e). Then, Schiffer seems to object, the assertion of (e*) vehicles information about a proposition and not about your

husband's brother. On the contrary, Schiffer seems to maintain, by the assertion of (e*) your husband's brother wants to speak of his falling in love with you and not of his believing a certain proposition.

My response is that granting that the truth-condition of the proposition expressed by (e*) is that your husband's brother stands in the believing relation to the proposition expressed by (e) is not to deny that by asserting (e*) your husband's brother communicates information about him. I suggest that the advocate of the Fregean model might draw the distinction between *content* of thought and *object* of thought. Propositions are contents of thought. The objects of thought are the state of affairs propositions are about. Grasping a proposition is a necessary condition for thinking of a state of affairs. To have an object of thought presupposes to have a content of thought. Hence, the truth-conditions of propositional attitude sentences must involve propositions, for propositions are theoretical entities introduced to explain our ability to think about state of affairs³. They are the relata of propositional attitudes. But to concede this much is not to say that the information communicated by a propositional attitude sentence is about a subject entertaining a certain proposition. The information communicated is about the object of thought, which is the state of affairs the subject is thinking about by entertaining the proposition. When I utter "John believes that London is the capital of England" I communicate that John believes that a certain state of affair obtains, I do not communicate that John entertains a certain proposition. Even though, in order for John to believe that London is the capital of England, it must be the case that he entertains the proposition made of the concept of London and the concept of being the capital of England.

Thus, the proposition expressed by (e) is the content of the belief of your husband's brother. The object of his belief is the state of affairs made of him, you and the falling in love relation. By asserting (e*) your husband's brother speaks of the object of his belief. He says that he believes that a certain state of affairs obtains. Even though the truth-condition of (e*) is that your husband's brother stands in the believing relation to the proposition expressed by (e), still that proposition is a mode of presentation of his falling in love with you. The information communicated by the assertion of (e*) is about your husband's brother falling in love with you. Schiffer's worry seems to be surmounted.

² For a defense of Fregean senses expressed by demonstratives and indexicals, see J. McDowell (1984).

³ I am not claiming that it is not possible to think of objects directly, in a way that does not involve modes of presentations or concepts. I am defending the Fregean view that grasping a propositional content requires entertaining a thought made out of concepts.

Argument (4) starts from a principle of the Fregean model:

(P) Whenever we refer to something, we do it by grasping a concept under which that thing falls.

Consider the following sentence:

(f) John believes that George Eliot was a man.

In (f) “George Eliot” refers to the concept of George Eliot. Then, Schiffer argues, a speaker refers to the concept of George Eliot by asserting (f). But, according to (P), he must grasp a concept of the concept of George Eliot. Given the possibility of iterating the structure of propositional attitude sentences, the hierarchy of concepts is generated. My contention is that the problem arises because of a sort of ambiguity of “refer”. There are at least two readings of “refer” that should be distinguished:

- (i) To contribute to truth-conditions.
- (ii) To think/speak of.

When Schiffer says that the speaker refers to the concept of George Eliot in asserting (f), he might mean two different things:

- (i*) The truth-condition of (f) involves the concept of George Eliot.
- (ii*) The speaker speaks of the concept of George Eliot.

If Mary asserts (f), certainly the truth-condition of her assertion involves the concept of George Eliot⁴. Her assertion is true if and only if John stands in the believing relation to the proposition $\langle C_{\text{George Eliot}}, C_{\text{being a man}} \rangle$. So, in the sense of (i), it is true that Mary refers to the concept of George Eliot. Yet, she communicates information about John’s *object* of thought. Hence, she speaks of George Eliot, not of the concept of George Eliot. In conclusion, Principle (P) should be constrained: if “refer” is taken to mean thinking/speaking of, then

⁴ Of course (f) might be given a *de re* reading. But I am endorsing Kaplan’s idea that *de re* attitudes can be shaped in terms of *de dicto* attitudes.

principle (P) holds. If “refer” is taken to mean contributing to truth-conditions, principle (P) does not hold.

Distinguishing (i) from (ii), we can waive the hierarchy of concepts⁵. The truth-condition of (f) is that John stands in the believing relation to the proposition $\langle C_{\text{Geroge Eliot}}, C_{\text{being a man}} \rangle$. We do not need any concept of concept in order to specify the truth-condition of (f)⁶. But we do not need any concept of concept to construct the proposition expressed by (f) either. The proposition expressed by (f) is made of the concept of John, the concept of the believing relation and the proposition $\langle C_{\text{Geroge Eliot}}, C_{\text{being a man}} \rangle$. We can represent such proposition as $\langle C_{\text{believing}}, C_{\text{John}}, \langle C_{\text{Geroge Eliot}}, C_{\text{being a man}} \rangle \rangle$. To grasp this proposition a speaker needs to master the concepts $C_{\text{believing}}, C_{\text{John}}, C_{\text{Geroge Eliot}}, C_{\text{being a man}}$ and to know the syntactic structure of (f). We can form propositional attitude sentences more and more complicated without being forced to generate any hierarchy of concepts. The truth-condition of a sentence like (f*) “Mary believes that John believes that George Eliot was a man” is that Mary stands in the believing relation to the proposition $\langle C_{\text{believing}}, C_{\text{John}}, \langle C_{\text{Geroge Eliot}}, C_{\text{being a man}} \rangle \rangle$. And we can represent the proposition expressed by (f*) as $\langle C_{\text{believing}}, C_{\text{Mary}}, \langle C_{\text{believing}}, C_{\text{John}}, \langle C_{\text{Geroge Eliot}}, C_{\text{being a man}} \rangle \rangle \rangle$. Again, to grasp this proposition a speaker needs to master the concepts $C_{\text{believing}}, C_{\text{Mary}}, C_{\text{John}}, C_{\text{Geroge Eliot}}, C_{\text{being a man}}$ and to know the syntactic structure of (f*). Nothing more is required.

3. Before addressing arguments (1), (2) and (5), I want to discuss Schiffer’s conception of propositions as pleonastic entities. My claim is that Schiffer’s proposal is not robust enough to vindicate the existence of propositions.

⁵ There are philosophers who hold that the hierarchy is harmless and coherent with reading (ii). For example, Burge (2005 p. 172) says: “We understand indirect sense, and know ‘what it is’ in the sense of comprehending it, if we can both use the that-clause-forming expression (‘that’) and understand the sense of the sentential expression to which it applies. Nothing more is needed”.

⁶ One might object that the hierarchy of concepts remains, since one can think of a concept and then one needs a concept of a concept anyway ad infinitum: e.g. “I believe that Mary’s concept of John’s concept of Eliot is inadequate”. My answer is that we should distinguish between thinking of a concept, as object of thought, from grasping of a concept, as understanding it. In order to explain how we can grasp the concept expressed by “Mary’s concept of John’s concept of Eliot” we do not need to introduce the hierarchy of concepts. The concept expressed by “Mary’s concept of John’s concept of Eliot” is grasped by entertaining the concepts expressed by the composing words plus the syntactic structure of composition. Of course, we might think of, in the sense of referring to, different concepts and if we like we can order them in a hierarchy of levels: “John’s concept of Eliot” has a referent different from the referent of “Mary’s concept of John’s concept of Eliot”. We might also say that if the referent of “John’s concept of Eliot” belongs to level n , then “Mary’s concept of John’s concept of Eliot” belongs to level $n + 1$. However, we do not need to introduce the hierarchy of concepts in order to explain the understanding of “Mary’s concept of John’s concept of Eliot” and of “John’s concept of Eliot”.

Schiffer wants to keep the idea that that-clauses are singular terms referring to propositions. He rejects the idea that propositions are structured entities. According to him, propositions are unstructured pleonastic entities. Pleonastic entities are entities whose existence is secured by the fact that we follow certain linguistic practices. We follow a linguistic practice of this kind whenever we make use of “something-from-nothing-transformations”. A something-from-nothing-transformation is an inference from sentences that do not contain the singular terms, which are supposed to refer to the pleonastic entities, to sentences that contain them. Schiffer discusses the case of fictional characters. Fictional characters are introduced by something-from-nothing-transformations in which we move from sentences that describe the way a certain author used a certain singular term in writing a certain novel to sentences that contain singular terms (allegedly) referring to fictional character. For example, we move from:

(j) Joyce wrote a novel where he used the proper name “Buck Mulligan” in the pretending way characteristic of fiction

to

(j*) Joyce created the fictional character “Buck Mulligan”.

(j*) contains the singular term ‘the fictional character “Buck Mulligan”’ that refers to the fictional character created by Joyce.

Fictional characters are abstract. It is controversial whether abstract entities possess a temporal collocation, but for sure they lack spatial collocation and causal efficacy. How, then, can we get knowledge of them? We have knowledge of them by learning the linguistic practice that employs the singular terms allegedly referring to them. Schiffer⁷ strengthens the case by the following example. Imagine a possible world in which Joyce wrote the same novels as he did in the actual world. That world is identical to the actual world apart from the fact that speakers are not engaged in the linguistic practice of the something-from-nothing-transformations like (j)-(j*). In that possible world fictional characters exist but nobody is aware of their existence. To have knowledge of their existence it is sufficient that speakers start the linguistic practice involving something-from-nothing-transformations like (j)-(j*).

According to Schiffer, propositions too are pleonastic entities introduced by something-from-nothing-transformations like the following one:

from:

(m) Fido is a dog

to

(m*) The proposition that Fido is a dog is true.

The practice of inferring from any sentence *p* the sentence “the proposition that *p* is true”, according to Schiffer, is sufficient to establish the existence of propositions.

I maintain that Schiffer’s strategy is flawed⁸. We might agree that the occurrence of a singular term in a *true* sentence implies an ontological commitment: if the sentence is true and the singular term is a genuine singular term, then its referent exists. However, in order to derive an ontological commitment from the acceptance of a sentence, we must give some warrant that the sentence in question is true. As to the something-from-nothing-transformations, we must provide a justification that if we move from true sentences we get *true* sentences. The mere presence in our linguistic practice of certain inferences *per se* is not sufficient to establish an ontological commitment. The claim that the something-from-nothing-transformations are truth-preserving needs to be justified.

Schiffer says that they are conceptually valid⁹. But what does he mean? Perhaps, that those inferences are constitutive of the meaning of the expressions occurring in them. This cannot be satisfactory. Certainly, they are not constitutive of the meaning of the sentences that occur as premises. One might claim that they are constitutive of the meaning of the sentences that occur as conclusions. But this view presupposes a strong notion of analyticity, according to which meaning constitutive sentences and inferences are respectively analytically true and analytically valid. This is the notion of analyticity that was the target of Quine’s attack and it would be more a difficulty than an advantage if Schiffer wanted to use such notion.

⁷ Cf. Schiffer (2003 p. 52).

⁸ Sainsbury (2005) raises some objections to Schiffer’s view. Some of them are similar to mine.

⁹ Cf. Schiffer (2003 p. 52).

So, what does Schiffer mean by “conceptually valid inferences”? His idea seems to be that the something-from-nothing-transformations are conceptually valid in the sense that they are individuated simply by reflecting on our linguistic practice. This is a kind of investigation that we can produce while sitting in our philosophical armchair through a piece of conceptual analysis. But is it sufficient to detect certain patterns of inferences by reflecting on our linguistic practice to make them valid? I claim that the answer must be negative.

Suppose we expand a theory T into T^* by adding the operator “the proposition that” and the relative axiom schema: $p \rightarrow \text{the proposition that } p \text{ is true}$. One instrumentalist might admit that within T^* the inference from a theorem p of T to the sentence “the proposition that p is true” is justified, without accepting the truth of T^* . Given that the commitment to the existence of propositions depends on the truth of T^* , the fact that within T^* any theorem p of T implies “the proposition that p is true” *per se* does not provide any answer to the question whether propositions exist. The instrumentalist is not persuaded that T^* is true. He argues that T^* is not true just because he is not persuaded that there are the referents of the singular terms we form by the operator “the proposition that”.

A precondition of the validity of the something-from-nothing-transformations is that their conclusions give descriptions of a domain of existing things. But to claim the existence of things of a certain kind requires a piece of ontological work that cannot be reduced to the mere detection of patterns of inferences in our linguistic practice. The question of the existence of propositions cannot be answered simply by registering some aspects of our linguistic practice.

In what follows, I want to compare Schiffer’s view with the strategy for introducing abstract entities discussed by Frege (1884) and more recently by Wright (1983). It will emerge that the acceptance of abstract entities in our ontology requires a more robust ontological view that transcends the detection of regularities in our linguistic practice. The comparison is also preparatory to the guidelines of a theory of concepts as basic constituents of propositions. In section §4 I will argue that we can introduce concepts by appealing to the Frege/Wright strategy.

Consider the following biconditionals:

- (i) The direction of a = the direction of b if and only if a is parallel to b .

(ii) The number of Fs = the number of Gs if and only if there is a one-one mapping from the Fs to the Gs.

These biconditionals are taken to legitimise the ontology of directions and numbers by showing that the commitment to the existence of such entities is already contained in their right-hand sides. The claim is that the truth of the left-hand sides is no more metaphysically and epistemologically problematic than the truth of the right-hand sides where no reference is made to abstract entities. Elaborating a theory containing biconditionals like (i) and (ii) is not simply to register regularities of use in our linguistic practice. In general, elaborating a theory like this requires a substantive piece of work, of philosophical work. It is true that this is a work that we do while sitting in our philosophical armchair through a piece of conceptual analysis, but it is a philosophical enterprise looking for a justification of the existence of abstract entities. This allows for a remark about the example that Schiffer offers to convince us of the existence of pleonastic entities. As noted, the example concerns fictional characters. My claim is that Schiffer's example looks convincing because it is plausible to take conditionals like the following:

(o) If Joyce wrote a novel by using the proper name "Buck Mulligan" in the pretending way characteristic of fiction, then Joyce created the fictional character "Buck Mulligan"

as part of a theory about the constitution of the property of creating fictional characters that employs biconditionals like (i) and (ii). This theory will say that the property of creating a fictional character is constituted by the complex property of using proper names in the pretending way characteristic of fiction, of writing, publishing and reading books, of teaching and studying literature etc. Setting up this theory should proceed in accordance with the Frege/Wright strategy, namely by:

- 1) Introducing singular terms for fictional characters by means of the operator "the fictional character".
- 2) Stating biconditionals specifying what constitutes the property of creating fictional characters.
- 3) Individuating identity criteria for fictional characters according to the principle of abstraction:

$$\forall\alpha\forall\beta(\Sigma(\alpha) = \Sigma(\beta) \leftrightarrow \alpha \approx \beta)$$

where “ Σ ” stands for the operator that, applied to singular terms of the kind of α and β , generates singular terms for abstract entities, and “ \approx ” stands for a relation of congruence defined over the entities denoted by singular terms of the kind of α and β ¹⁰.

A conditional like (o) turns out to be the right-to-left-side of a biconditional like:

(o*) Joyce created the fictional character “Buck Mulligan” if and only if Joyce wrote a novel where he used the proper name “Buck Mulligan” in the pretending way characteristic of fiction, and his work was published, and read and taught etc.

This biconditional says that the property of creating a certain fictional character is constituted by the complex property of writing a certain novel by using a certain proper name in a certain way, of publishing and reading books, teaching and studying literature etc.

In conclusion, the theorist who wants to introduce fictional characters in his ontology might defend the truth of a conditional like (o), or the validity of a something-from-nothing-transformation like (j)-(j*) by developing an ontological view about what constitutes the property of creating fictional characters on the model of the contextual definition of numbers and directions. But to do that amounts to making a piece of philosophical work that transcends the simple registration of regularities in our linguistic practice.

I claim that the same conclusion must be drawn as regarding the case of propositions. It is not sufficient to register regularities in our linguistic practice in order to establish the existence of propositions. A more robust ontological view is needed, from which we must be able at least to extract identity criteria for propositions. All much Schiffer does not provide. He does not offer any theoretical defence of the truth of conditionals like (o) and of the validity of the something-from-nothing-transformations like (j)-(j*).

¹⁰ In the case of fictional characters “ Σ ” is the operator “the fictional character” which applies to names of proper names, and the relation of congruence is the relation of being used by the same author in the same novel, published, read, taught in the same book etc.

4. In this section, I will argue that we can have an ontological view of what constitutes the property of expressing a certain concept, from which we can extract identity criteria for concepts and consequently for propositions as structured entities made of them. By argument (1) Schiffer denounces the lack of a theory of concepts as basic components of propositions. I want to show that a theory that quantifies over concepts can be developed on certain grounds that Schiffer himself is forced to admit.

Schiffer is obliged to give identity criteria for propositions. After all, the sentence “the proposition that Superman flies is true” follows from the sentence “Superman flies”; but the sentence “the proposition the Clark Kent flies is true” follows as well. While having the same truth-conditions, the proposition that Superman flies and the proposition that Clark Kent flies are different. Why? According to Schiffer, the criteria for the attribution of propositional attitudes enable us to distinguish them. These criteria establish, for example, that Lois believes that Superman flies but disbelieves that Clark Kent flies. When we attribute a belief to a subject, Schiffer says, we do not proceed by individuating the proposition, which is the content of the belief, and then by checking whether the subject believes it. On the contrary, we first verify whether the criteria for the attribution of the belief are satisfied and then we identify the proposition believed¹¹. Given that such criteria justify the attribution to Lois of the belief that Superman flies and do not justify the attribution of the belief that Clark Kent flies, we conclude that the proposition that Superman flies is different from the proposition that Clark Kent flies. Although Schiffer does not say it explicitly, these criteria must concern basically the linguistic behaviour. He needs criteria for the evaluation of belief ascriptions that enable us to distinguish the proposition that Superman flies from the proposition that Clark Kent flies. Being propositions “unstructured but very fine-grained”¹², where could such criteria come from? Very likely, criteria for the evaluation of ascriptions of beliefs as relations to so fine-grained propositions can be traced only in linguistic behaviour. For example, Lois will give her assent to “Superman flies” and will dissent from “Clark Kent flies”.

Then, it seems that Schiffer is committed to the view that the identity criteria for pleonastic propositions must be extracted out of speakers’ linguistic dispositions. I want to strengthen this view to construct a more robust theory of concepts. Indeed, accepting that view is at least consistent with the use conception of meaning. The central idea of the use conception of meaning is to individuate concepts through regularities of referential and

¹¹ Cf. Schiffer (2003 pp. 72-77).

¹² Cf. Schiffer (2003 p. 84).

inferential uses of linguistic expressions. The claim is that the regularities of the use of a certain expression are constitutive of the property of expressing a certain concept¹³. My suggestion is that if we allow for constitutive uses, then we get the resources to construct a theory that quantifies over concepts.

Let w be a linguistic expression and U the property of being governed by certain constitutive uses, we proceed by:

- 1) Introducing the singular term for the concept expressed by w : “the concept W ”.
- 2) Stating a biconditional saying what it is for w to express the concept W :

w expresses the concept W if and only if Uw .

- 3) Individuating identity criteria for concepts:

the concept W is identical to the concept Y if and only if w and y have the same constitutive uses.

This theory allows us to identify and quantify over concepts. The quantification over concepts allows us to treat them as basic components of propositions. Propositions can therefore be considered as structured entities formed of concepts and syntactic structures. We can have the traditional identity criteria for propositions: two propositions are identical if they have the same components and the same syntactic structure. This offers a reply to argument (1).

We can counter argument (2) and (5) as well. In the light of a use theory of meaning, we can resist Schiffer’s charge that there exists no single concept shared by all people who visit New York. Even if visitors will have different views of New York, this does not imply that there is no constitutive use of the proper name “New York”. We can imagine a constitutive use with different levels of expertise. Although it is not necessary that all speakers master the constitutive use completely, that use constitutes the property of expressing the concept of New York. The division of the linguistic labour and the deference to experts enable us to attribute propositional attitudes towards propositions to speakers even though those propositions are made of concepts that they do not master completely.

¹³ See, for example, Horwich’s (1998) and Cozzo’s (1994) theories of meaning.

Peacocke (1992 pp. 27-33), for example, distinguishes two level of mastering of concepts: (i) possession of concepts and (ii) attribution of concepts. We can attribute attitudes to propositions to a thinker who does not fulfil completely the possession conditions of the composing concepts since the attribution conditions are much weaker than the possession conditions. He must fulfil only part of the possession conditions and defer in his use of the word to other members of his linguistic community, who are experts and meet completely the possession conditions. Therefore, even if we concede that not all speakers fulfil the possession conditions of the concept of New York, we can attribute to them attitudes to propositions formed of that concept. It is sufficient that they master partially the constitutive use of the proper name “New York” and defer in their use of it to the expert members of their community.

Finally, let us address argument (2). It challenges the Fregean model to explain how propositions get their truth-conditions. Again, it is not immediate to understand what Schiffer has in mind. Perhaps he means that the Fregean model does not provide a physicalistic explanation of semantic notions like reference and truth. If this is the objection, a strategy to resist it is to hold that it is not necessary to provide a physicalistic account of semantic notions. One way to do so is to employ the Tarski-like definition of truth¹⁴. We might hold that the determination of propositions’ truth-conditions goes along with the determination of sentences’ truth-conditions, which is achieved through a Tarski-like definition of truth.

Schiffer might stress the point that the Tarski-like definition of truth does not provide a physicalistic analysis of truth. But why should we accept the demand for a physicalistic analysis of truth? One rationale for demanding it is to credit semantic properties with causal efficacy. But the rationale for crediting semantic properties with causal efficacy is the willingness to resort to them in explaining linguistic competence. Why do speakers use linguistic expressions as they do? Answer: because of (the implicit knowledge of) their semantic contents. And why do linguistic expressions have those semantic contents? The physicalistic reduction is required to answer this question, basically in terms of naturalistic theories of reference. It turns out that the need for physicalistic theories of semantic properties stems from the demand of employing them in explaining linguistic competence, i.e. from the demand of shaping the notion of meaning by means of them. But whoever accepts a use

¹⁴ I assume that the Tarski-like definition can be extended to semantically universal languages, like natural languages or fragments of them containing their own truth-predicate. I assume the feasibility of some solution like that proposed by Kripke in his “Outline of a Theory of Truth” (1975).

conception of meaning is willing to reject such demand. According to such conception, semantic notions are not employed to shape the notion of meaning.

It is worth noticing another relevant aspect¹⁵. It is the use conception of meaning that allows us to employ the Tarski-like definition of truth. The Tarski-like definition gives an absolute definition of truth in L. One of the characteristics of the Tarski-like definition is that the meanings of the expressions of L are taken as fixed. Convention T says explicitly that we need to define truth in L in such a way that the T-sentences meet a crucial condition: the sentences of the meta-language on the right-hand side of the T-sentences must be the *translation* of the sentences of the object-language on the left-hand side. The notion of translation presupposes the notion of meaning. A translation is correct if and only if it is meaning-preserving. Then, we cannot spell out the notion of meaning in terms of truth-conditions: it would be plainly circular to use the notion of meaning for constructing the definition of truth in L, and at the same time to cash the notion of meaning in terms that require an account of the property of truth in L. Convention T uses the two-place meta-metalinguistic predicate “x is equivalent in meaning to y”, where “x” ranges over the sentences of the object-language and “y” over the sentences of the meta-language. But how should we explain the relation of being equivalent in meaning? Any explanation according to which x is equivalent in meaning to y if and only if x and y are true under the same conditions would require that we already possess a truth predicate for the object-language and the meta-language in a meta-meta-language. But if we are able to define truth in L in a meta-meta-language, then we can already define it in a meta-language, since the meta-meta-language is a meta-language. The Tarski-like definition would be deprived of its philosophical importance. Therefore, not only the Tarski-like definition presupposes the notion of meaning, but also it requires a use conception of meaning¹⁶.

In sum, the use conception of meaning provides the resources both to elaborate a theory of concepts as basic constituents of propositions and to explain how propositions get their truth-conditions.

Massimiliano Vignolo

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¹⁵ I borrow this argument from Patterson (2002 pp. 7-8).

¹⁶ For a defence of the claim that truth can be defined by a Tarski-like definition see Vignolo (2006).

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