

Pleonastic Propositions and the Face Value Theory

Alex Steinberg
University of Bielefeld

Abstract

Propositions are a useful tool in philosophical theorizing, even though they are not beyond reasonable nominalistic doubts. Stephen Schiffer's pleonasticism about propositions is a paradigm example of a realistic account that tries to alleviate such doubts by grounding truths about propositions in ontologically innocent facts. Schiffer maintains two characteristic theses about propositions: first, that they are so-called pleonastic entities whose existence is subject to what he calls something-from-nothing transformations (pleonasticism); and, second, that they are the referents of 'that'-clauses that function as singular terms in propositional attitude ascriptions (the Face Value Theory). The paper turns the first thesis against the second: if propositions are pleonastic entities, it is argued, we should not take them to be referred to in propositional attitude ascriptions. Rather, propositional attitude ascriptions should be available as bases for propositional something-from-nothing transformations.

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Propositions are a useful tool in philosophical and linguistic theorizing. They are standardly taken to be the primary bearers of truth and falsity, the contents of propositional attitudes and speech acts, and the senses of assertoric sentences. Still, propositions are not beyond reasonable doubt, typically raised by ontologically scrupulous philosophers with a taste for desert landscapes. In recent work, Stephen Schiffer has developed a realistic account of propositions that respects and alleviates nominalistic scruples. He maintains two characteristic theses about propositions: first, that they are so-called pleonastic entities whose existence is subject to what he calls something-from-nothing transformations; and, second, that they are the referents of 'that'-clauses that function as singular terms in propositional attitude and speech act ascriptions such as 'Ann believes that Fido is a dog' and 'Ben claims that there is life on Mars' (henceforth I will only explicitly mention the former). In this paper, I'd like to turn Schiffer's first thesis against his second: if propositions are pleonastic entities, I will argue, we should *not* take them to be referred to in propositional attitude ascriptions. Rather, propositional attitude ascriptions should be available as (at least part of) the *basis* for propositional something-from-nothing transformations, and, thus, cannot already treat of propositions.

To make this point, I will first sketch pleonasticism about propositions in section 1. Then, in section 2, I will critically assess the main reason to believe in ‘that’-clause reference and find it wanting. In section 3 I will explain why pleonasticism should reject the view that propositions are referred to in typical propositional attitude ascriptions.

Schiffer’s view on ‘that’-clause reference can fairly be called the standard account of the semantics of propositional attitude ascriptions.¹ And his pleonasticism is but one way of spelling out a modest realism about propositions which takes them to be *derivative* or *dependent* entities.² Though for the sake of definiteness I will focus on Schiffer, the results of this paper are apt to generalize to affect a wide range of theoretical positions.

1 Pleonastic Propositions

Stephen Schiffer argues for the view that propositions are pleonastic entities, subject to something-from-nothing transformations. Something-from-nothing transformations are valid inferences that take one from a statement (or statements) in which no reference to things of a certain kind is made to a statement in which they are referred to, and which in turn entails the existence of things of that kind. Thus, according to Schiffer, we may validly infer

1 The proposition that Fido is a dog is true;

in which reference is made to a proposition from

2 Fido is a dog;

in which the only thing referred to is Fido.

Generally, inferences according to the following schemata yield something-from-nothing transformations concerning propositions:³

$$(T) \frac{p}{\text{The proposition that } p \text{ is true.}} \qquad (F) \frac{\neg p}{\text{The proposition that } p \text{ is false.}}$$

According to pleonasticism, such inferences are conceptually valid: they are valid, and their validity flows from the proposition-concepts involved in their conclusions.⁴ Correlatively, such inferences are knowledge transferring: everyone who has mastered the concepts involved in the inferences can come to know

¹Cp., e.g., Künne (2003); Forbes (forthcoming).

²Cp., e.g., Schaffer (2009); Fine (2012).

³The schemata cannot hold in full generality because of the familiar paradoxes. Although any account will eventually have to find a satisfactory way of dealing with them, I will not address this difficulty in this paper. Cp., e.g., Leitgeb (2016).

⁴For a discussion of what such concepts would have to look like in order to make good on this claim see Steinberg (2013b: §2) and Steinberg (2013a: ch. 4.1), where it is argued that, *pace* Schiffer, we should take the validity of such inferences to stem from the *individual* concepts involved (such as the concept expressed by the singular term ‘the proposition that Fido is a dog’) rather than from the sortals (such as the concept expressed by the general term ‘proposition’). Nothing hinges on this for the current discussion.

their conclusions on the basis of knowledge of their premises. We can, thus, come to know something about the proposition that Fido is a dog (viz. that it is true), simply by drawing on our knowledge about Fido (that it's a dog), and our mastery of the relevant proposition-concept. In this way, it is particularly easy to learn things about propositions, even though they are abstract entities: things that stand outside the causal order and are as such inaccessible to our senses.

Our cognitive access to propositions via conceptually valid something-from-nothing transformations is quite distinctive. It differs from our access to the medium-sized dry goods in our immediate surroundings, to the nano-sized particles of physics, and to the far away objects of cosmology. But it is not unique. Other theoretical entities of philosophy are arguably also subject to something-from-nothing transformations. Thus, from

2 Fido is a dog;

we may validly infer all of the below:⁵

3 Fido has the property of being a dog;

4 Fido is a member of the set of all dogs;

5 The fact that Fido is a dog exists;

6 The state of affairs that Fido is a dog obtains; and

7 The possibility that Fido is a dog is actual.

Pleonasticism about propositions is, thus, only a special case of a promising realistic account of a broad variety of theoretical entities of philosophy and neighbouring disciplines in general.⁶

How can it be a *conceptual* matter that a statement whose truth requires the existence of a certain proposition can be validly inferred from a statement whose truth does not seem to impose such a requirement? What stops us from populating our world with all kinds of strange entities whose concepts are allegedly subject to something-from-nothing transformations if this should be legitimate in the case of propositions? Are there also gods and Schifferian wish-dates – dates whose existence supervenes on people's dating wishes – whose concepts are manufactured cleverly enough for them to be subject to something-from-nothing transformations? Schiffer's answer turns on the ontological status of pleonastic entities: they are 'thin and inconsequential', not affecting the 'pre-existing causal order in any way'. This, of course, is only a temporal metaphor⁷ which Schiffer tries to explicate more rigorously in terms of conservative theory extensions.⁸ Although the success of this explication may be doubted, this does not affect the plausibility of the general idea: while pleonastic entities like

⁵Cp. Mulligan (2006).

⁶Schiffer (2003: ch. 2) takes fictional entities, properties and events to be plausible candidates for being pleonastic.

⁷It should not be taken at face value. After all, Schiffer accepts that propositions exist necessarily and eternally. Thus, nothing literally pre-dates propositions.

⁸See Schiffer (2003: §2.3) and cp., e.g., Hale and Wright (2000: 302).

propositions and properties add a further layer to reality without disturbing the ontological core,⁹ gods and wish-dates would have to have significant influence on the core (e.g. by parting seas and being the dates of those people who wish for one) thereby disqualifying themselves from falling under concepts that are subject to something-from-nothing transformations. Propositions are, while Schifferian wish-dates and intervening Gods would not be, *fundamentally non-disruptive*. This is why the former are candidates for being pleonastic entities while the latter are not.

While in the case of other pleonastic entities our main cognitive access to them is via their something-from-nothing transformations, Schiffer goes out of his way to argue that this is not so in the case of propositions. For, according to Schiffer, propositions also play a pivotal role in our practice of ascribing mental attitudes to us and others. And, crucially, ‘the role of that-clauses in propositional-attitude discourse is not deducible from the something-from-nothing practice and is essential to completing the account of pleonastic propositions’ (Schiffer 2003: 72). Propositions are, according to Schiffer, referred to in propositional attitude ascriptions such as

8 Ann believes that Hesperus is a planet;

and the truth-value of this sentence is in no way determined by something-from-nothing transformations instantiating (T) or (F). After all, Ann will believe many things that are true, but sadly also a few things that are false.

Anticipating a bit, according to the second tenet of Schiffer’s account of propositions, what he calls the *face value theory* of propositional attitude ascriptions, belief reports such as (8) share their logical form with sentences such as

9 Ben hits that guy.

In both sentences a two-place predicate (‘believes’ and ‘hits’ respectively) is flanked by two singular terms (‘Ann’/‘that Hesperus is a planet’ and ‘Ben’/‘that guy’), and the sentences are true just in case the referents of the singular terms stand in the relation signified by the predicate.

However, even though both, thus, have the logical form displayed by the following formula:

10 aRb ;

the case of propositional attitude ascriptions such as (8) differs in five characteristic respects from other relation ascriptions such as (9), according to Schiffer:¹⁰

1. In order to evaluate (9) we typically identify the referents of the singular terms ‘Ben’ and ‘that guy’, and *then* evaluate the statement by determining whether the former stands in the relation signified by ‘hits’ to the

⁹What exactly belongs to the ontological core is debatable. Does it, for instance, consist in the objects of folk ontology such as trees, people and tables, or the very small particles of physics, or even the cosmic whole? How this debate is decided is irrelevant to the purposes of this paper, as long as propositions don’t belong to the core.

¹⁰Cf. Schiffer (2003: 72ff.).

latter. Not so in the case of (8): evaluation proceeds without *first* determining the reference of the ‘that’-clause. Rather, which proposition is referred to is determined, according to Schiffer, partly by the criteria for evaluating the whole belief report. Thus, different propositions may be referred to depending on what has to be the case for (8) to count as true. Does Ann, for instance, have to know Hesperus by name or by a certain characteristic description in order for the belief report to count as true? Depending on the answer to that question, different propositions will be referred to in the relevant utterance of the sentence.

2. Determination of the referent of ‘that guy’, whose reference is contextually determined, proceeds at least partly via conscious referential intentions of the speaker. Not so in the case of (8): although, as detailed with respect to the last point, the reference of ‘that Hesperus is a planet’ is contextually determined, conscious referential intentions of speakers do not play any role in that determination.
3. There is a condition C such that ‘that guy’ refers to Colin (say) in virtue of ⟨‘that guy’, Colin⟩ satisfying C , and C is independent of the truth-conditions of (9). Roughly, $C(x, y)$ is the condition of y being a contextually salient person the speaker intended to refer to by uttering the expression x . Not so in the case of (8): there is no condition *independent of the truth-conditions of the whole belief report* whose satisfaction suffices for being the referent of the ‘that’-clause.
4. The reference of a semantically complex singular term such as ‘the father of that guy’ is fixed by its structure and the semantic values of its constituent expressions (in this case, perhaps: the function that maps people to their fathers and the referent of ‘that guy’), and *not* by the criteria for evaluating the sentence in which it occurs. Not so in the case of ‘that’-clauses: the reference of ‘that Hesperus is a planet’ in an utterance of (8) is fixed by the criteria for evaluating (8), and not, ultimately, by the semantic values of its constituents together with its structure.¹¹
5. The identity and individuation of Colin owes nothing to the evaluation of the statement (9). It’s not as if Colin differs from David because (9) is true (as uttered when Colin is salient), while ‘Ben hits this guy’ is not true (as uttered when David is salient). Correlatively, finding out that (9) (uttered with Colin salient) may be true while ‘Ben hits this guy’ (uttered with David salient) is false is not a paradigmatic way of coming to know that Colin isn’t David. Not so in the case of (8): the identity and individuation of the proposition referred to partly depends on the truth-conditions of (8). It is partly because (8) may be true, while

¹¹It may be that the criteria for evaluating (8) also manage, as a by-product, to determine semantic values for the clause’s constituents – something like Fregean senses – in such a way that these semantic values, together with its structure, determine the reference of the ‘that’-clause. But even then, the reference of the ‘that’-clause will be ultimately determined by the criteria for evaluating (8).

11 Ann believes that Phosphorus is a planet;

is not, that the propositions referred to differ. Correlatively, we may come to know that the proposition that Hesperus is a planet is not the proposition that Phosphorus is a planet, by noting that the truth-conditions of (8) differ from those of (11).

Schiffer's overall theory of propositions thus includes the claim that they are pleonastic entities and *in addition* a list of respects in which 'that'-clauses in propositional attitude ascriptions differ from other singular terms in relational predications such as (9). These latter features of 'that'-clauses have no explication in the something-from-nothing status of their alleged referents, but need to be stated separately in a full account of propositions and our ways of talking and thinking about them. This disunity of Schiffer's account of propositions – which has no obvious counterpart in his theories of other pleonastic entities such as properties or fictional entities – might make us suspicious. What gives rise to the disunity is the thesis that 'that'-clauses in propositional attitude ascriptions function as singular terms for propositions, even though they behave very unlike typical singular terms in regular contexts. The next section scrutinizes Schiffer's reasons for subscribing to this thesis.

2 The Face Value Theory

Let us start with a statement of the face value theory of belief reports, which generalizes in the obvious way to other propositional attitude and to speech act ascriptions. According to the face value theory of belief reports, belief reports such as

8 Ann believes that Hesperus is a planet;

have the logical form of ordinary atomic sentences in which a two-place predicate, 'believe', is flanked by two singular terms, 'Ann' and 'that Hesperus is a planet'. The referent of the second singular term is a proposition, to wit: the proposition that Hesperus is a planet. (8) is, thus, true just in case the referent of 'Ann', Ann, stands in the relation signified by 'believe', the belief relation, to the proposition that Hesperus is a planet. Schematically, a belief report of the form '*a* believes that *p*' is true, just in case the referent of '*a*' stands in the belief relation to the proposition referred to by 'that *p*'.

This account of belief reports may be straightforwardly generalized to other propositional attitude and speech act ascriptions such as

12 Ann knows that Hesperus is a planet; and

13 Ben claims that Hesperus is a planet.

Let ' ϕ ' be any propositional attitude or speech act verb that takes a 'that'-clause complement. The generalized face value theory claims that a sentence of the form '*a* ϕ -s that *p*' is true just in case the referent of '*a*' stands in the relation signified by ' ϕ ' to the proposition referred to by 'that *p*'.

If the face value theory is plausible this may bring a strategic advantage to the friends of propositions. As pointed out at the outset, although propositions play a key role in philosophical and linguistic theorizing, many philosophers doubt their existence. Proponents of the face value theory can enlist the men and women in the street as fellow believers in propositions, thus putting the doubters in opposition not just with ontologically unscrupulous linguists and philosophers of language, but with the population at large. For, all of us accept a plethora of belief reports. According to the face value theory, such reports say that a believer stands in the belief relation to a proposition, and, thus, can only be true if there are propositions for believers to stand in a relation to. Hence, all of us seem to be committed to the existence of propositions, if the face value theory is correct. Opponents of propositions would face an uphill battle.

Is the face value theory plausible? The main consideration in its favour runs as follows.¹² Consider arguments such as the following:

1. Ann believes that there is life on Mars. Ben believes that there is life on Mars. Therefore, there is something both Ann and Ben believe (namely that there is life on Mars).
2. Ann believes that there is life on Mars. That there is life on Mars is Ben's theory. Therefore, Ann believes Ben's theory.
3. Ann believes everything Ben says. Ben says that there is life on Mars. Therefore, Ann believes that there is life on Mars.

These arguments seem to be *deductively valid*. It is impossible for their premises to be true, unless their conclusions are also true. What is more, the validity of these arguments seems to be independent of the meaning of the non-logical expressions involved: however we systematically replace the names, verbs and 'that'-clauses, the result will remain valid.

The face value theory allows us to account for the validity of our arguments in a straightforward way. For, if belief reports share their logical form with ordinary atomic sentences in which a two-place predicate is flanked by two singular terms, we may translate our arguments into the language of first-order predicate logic as follows:

$$1_{PL} \quad aBc, bBc \therefore \exists x (aBx \wedge bBx)$$

$$2_{PL} \quad aBc, c = d \therefore aBd$$

$$3_{PL} \quad \forall x (bSx \rightarrow aBx), bSc \therefore aBc$$

Since the PL arguments are valid, their alleged natural language counterparts are formally valid. On the face of it, this explanation of the arguments' validity depends on the face value theory, for otherwise the translation of the 'that'-clauses by individual constants of PL would not be legitimate. Thus, the face value theory is supported by its explanatory success.

¹²Cf., e.g., Schiffer (2003: ch. 1) and, more recently, MacFarlane (2014: 20) who bases one line of attack of expressivism on analogous considerations.

Note, however, that considerations of validity are rather weak support for the face value theory. For, it is one thing to accept that the above arguments are valid. It is quite another to accept them as *formally* valid, and yet a third to think that their formal validity can be captured with the resources of first-order predicate logic. Intuition may have something to say on the former issue, but it is theoretical considerations alone that have to be appealed to for deciding the latter two. If we treat our intuitions at face value, we should accept the validity of the arguments. But this does not force the other claims of the so-called face value theory on us.

To drive the point home, consider the following analogues of arguments (1) and (3):¹³

- 1*. Ann is blonde but clever. Ben is blonde but clever. Therefore, there is something both Ann and Ben are (namely blonde but clever).
- 3*. Ben does everything Ann does. Ann buys a drink at the bar. Therefore, Ben buys a drink at the bar.

Both arguments are valid: it is impossible for their premises to be true unless their conclusions are true as well. In (1*) quantification is into the position of an adjectival phrase ('blonde but clever'), as witnessed by the quantifier's 'namely'-rider. In (3*) there is quantification into the position of a verb phrase (or, rather, a vP): the relevant substituent is 'buy a drink at the bar', i.e. the untensed verb-object-adjunct constituent of the sentence 'Ann buys a drink at the bar'. But virtually no-one would take this to be evidence that adjectival and verb phrases act as singular terms in these sentences. The far more plausible hypothesis is that, as used in these sentences, the quantifiers 'something' and 'everything' are capable of binding variables in other than singular term position.

Now, on the face of it, the same move is available for our initial arguments (1) and (3). They involve quantification into the position of a 'that'-clause. *One* option is to claim that these 'that'-clauses are singular terms and, thus, occupy a position available for quantification by the objectual quantifiers of first-order predicate logic. But *another*, equally viable, option is to claim that, in addition to being able to quantify into singular term, adjectival and verb phrase position, natural language 'something' and 'everything' are also able to quantify into the position of 'that'-clauses that do not act as singular terms (i.e. into the position of non-referential complementizer phrases). Therefore, as used in this way the quantificational idioms cannot be translated by ' \exists ' and ' \forall ' of first-order predicate logic. Just as in the case of quantification into adjectival and verb phrase position, predicate logic would have to be extended to accommodate the great syntactic flexibility of natural language 'something' and 'everything'.¹⁴ This position could account for the validity of (1) and (3) by way of showing their formal validity albeit *not* with the resources of standard predicate logic,

¹³Since it involves what appears to be an identity statement, argument (2) requires a different diagnosis. We will return to it in the next section.

¹⁴For a suggestion of what the semantics of such uses of the natural language quantifiers may look like see Rosefeldt (2008: §8).

but rather of a logic for multiple-category quantification, which is needed for independent reasons anyway. Thus, at the end of the day, although the face value theory provides one possible account of the validity of the pertinent arguments, there is another straightforward account of their validity (disregarding (2) for the moment) which uses independently motivated resources. I conclude that the case for the face value theory is far from decisive.¹⁵

3 Extending the Base

Schiffer takes propositions to be pleonastic entities whose concepts validate something-from-nothing transformations. The something-from-nothing transformations recognized by Schiffer have conclusions in which the truth-predicate is applied to a proposition designator whose embedded clause does double duty as the transformation's premise.¹⁶ This connection directly demystifies the truth-related aspects of our talk about propositions. How can we ever get to know things about the proposition that Hesperus is a planet, even though it is causally inaccessible to us? That's easy! We know things about *Hesperus* – in particular, that it is a planet – and from this we can infer, on the basis of our conceptual competence, at least one thing about the proposition, namely that it is true. Similar considerations apply to other directly truth and falsity related aspects of our proposition talk.

However, there are vast areas of our proposition talk that remain unaffected, e.g.

- 14 The proposition that Hesperus is a planet is the content of one of Ann's beliefs;

or, slightly less stiltedly,

- 15 Ann believes the proposition that Hesperus is a planet.

(14) (as well as (15))¹⁷ appears to be about a certain proposition, and may well be true. Should we allow this truth to float free of truths that do not involve

¹⁵It may be worth pointing out that from the point of view of syntactic taxonomy, there isn't all that much face value to the face value theory: paradigmatic examples of singular terms (such as proper names, pronouns and definite descriptions) belong to the syntactic category of determiner phrases (DPs), 'that'-clauses are complementizer phrases (CPs). DPs and CPs differ in their syntactic distribution in various respects (for instance, sentence-initial CPs take DPs but not CPs as their subjects). This syntactic difference between them and paradigm singular terms makes the epithet 'face value' seem a bit tendentious. Capitalizing on such linguistic differences, philosophers and linguists have attempted to mount substitution failure arguments against the face value theory. See, e.g., Bach (1997), Moltmann (2003) and Rosefeldt (2008). For attempts at saving the face value theory from this charge see, e.g., King (2002) and Forbes (forthcoming).

¹⁶Officially, I take inferences to proceed from premises to conclusions, all of which are propositions. The reader should have no difficulties understanding loose formulations in the main text in strict terms.

¹⁷I conduct the subsequent discussion in terms of (14) rather than (15) because it generalizes more nicely: not all propositional attitude and speech act verbs seem to have pertinent *transitive* uses, witness 'hope' ('Ann hopes the proposition that Hesperus is a planet' seems to be defective) and 'fear' ('Ann fears the proposition that Hesperus is a planet' does not seem

propositions? If so, how can Schiffer’s claim that propositions are ‘thin and inconsequential’ be upheld? After all, whether or not the proposition is the content of one of her beliefs will make a huge difference to Ann’s mental life, and, correspondingly to her verbal and non-verbal behaviour, that would have no basis in anything non-propositional. Pleonastic propositions would turn out to be a significant disturbance to the non-pleonastic ontological core, contrary to the alleged fundamental non-disruptiveness of pleonastic entities. Consequently, (14) should be based on a truth that does not involve reference to a proposition if pleonasticism about propositions is to be upheld.

One might worry that this kind of consideration overgeneralizes. For, when discussing pleonastic properties Schiffer plausibly points out: ‘It is important to appreciate that it doesn’t follow from the fact that “ x has the property of being F ” is a pleonastic equivalent of “ x is F ” that *every* statement containing a singular term whose referent is a property is pleonastically (or in *any* way) equivalent to a statement containing no such singular term’ (Schiffer 2003: 70). He goes on to cite one of the favourites of the paraphrastic nominalist’s opponent: ‘Humility is a virtue’. However, it is one thing to accept that there may be merely *classificatory* sentences about pleonastic entities for which natural language contains no non-pleonastic equivalent (‘Humility is a virtue’ is a candidate), or even that the truth of such sentences is not grounded in the non-pleonastic. And it is quite another thing to accept that there are true sentences that describe discriminatory (i.e. non-universal) relations of the non-pleonastic to the pleonastic whose truth is not so grounded. For instance, it would be unacceptable on a pleonastic account of properties if the truth of a sentence like ‘Ann has the property of being humble’ did not turn out to be grounded in the property-free part of reality.

This distinction is borne out by the thought that underlies Schiffer’s conservativeness requirement, the fundamental non-disruptiveness of the pleonastic to the non-pleonastic: truths about the pleonastic should have no additional substantive consequences regarding the non-pleonastic realm. That it stands in a certain discriminatory relation to something pleonastic is a potentially *substantive* truth about something non-pleonastic: it may, for instance, provide the causal basis for behaviour describable in purely non-pleonastic terms. So, such a truth should not turn out to be an *additional* commitment of our theory about the world: it should be based on non-pleonastic truths, if pleonastic entities are fundamentally non-disruptive. No similar motivation can be given to exclude ungrounded purely classificatory truths about the pleonastic, such as ‘Humility is a virtue’ or ‘Humility is a property’.¹⁸

If we reject the face-value theory, and deny that propositions are referred to

to have a reading in which it is entailed by ‘Ann fears that Hesperus is a planet’). See the discussion alluded to in fn. 15 above. For current purposes I take (14) to be roughly equivalent to (15). Everything I say about (14) carries over straightforwardly to (15).

¹⁸Perhaps, not *all* truths about the pleonastic (or any kind of entity) can be fully grounded in truths entirely about other objects, as deRosset (2010) argues. The distinction in the main text between discriminatory relation ascriptions and classificatory truths circumvents this difficulty.

in ordinary belief reports, we can simply say that

- 14 The proposition that Hesperus is a planet is the content of one of Ann's beliefs;

which refers to a proposition, is based on

- 8 Ann believes that Hesperus is a planet;

which does not refer to any proposition. If, on the other hand, we were forced to accept the face-value theory of belief reports, it would be hard to see which non-proposition referring truths (14) could conceivably be based on.¹⁹ Fortunately, as we saw in the previous section, the credentials of the face value theory are weak. Let us thus further investigate what its denial can buy us!

An immediate benefit of denying that propositions are referred to in ordinary belief reports and propositional attitude and speech act ascriptions in general is that our stock of potential *nothing*-premises for propositional something-from-nothing transformations grows. If propositions are not referred to in ordinary belief ascriptions, the latter may quite generally provide the non-proposition involving basis for learning things about propositions. Most pertinently, denying the face value theory allows us to claim that inferences that proceed according to the following schemata are something-from-nothing transformations ('[p]' abbreviates 'the proposition that p'):

$$(B) \frac{a \text{ believes that } p.}{[p] \text{ is the content of one of } a\text{'s beliefs.}} \quad (\neg B) \frac{a \text{ does not believe that } p.}{[p] \text{ is not the content of any of } a\text{'s beliefs.}}$$

More generally (where ' ϕ ' is a propositional attitude or speech act verb, and ' ϕ -ing' an appropriate nominalization):

$$(P) \frac{a \phi\text{-s that } p.}{[p] \text{ is the content of one of } a\text{'s } \phi\text{-ings.}} \quad (\neg P) \frac{a \text{ does not } \phi \text{ that } p.}{[p] \text{ is not the content of any of } a\text{'s } \phi\text{-ings.}}$$

Thus, there is a straightforward answer to the question of how we can know anything about the role of propositions in people's mental lives. We can, for

¹⁹Of course, it may be that the truth of (8) is grounded in still more basic facts that do not involve propositions. The face value theorist could try to use this possibility for her purposes: she could claim that (1) *all* true belief reports are grounded in truths that do not involve propositions, truths about brain states perhaps, and (2) though explicit content ascriptions are not the conclusions of something-from-nothing transformations whose premises are belief reports, the latter nevertheless ground the former. Consequently, explicit content ascriptions would turn out to be grounded in the non-pleonastic, because they are grounded in belief ascriptions that are in turn grounded in the non-pleonastic. The prospects of establishing either of these two claims, let alone both of them, seem rather dim to me. In any case, as will be spelled out presently, the non-face value pleonasticist has an elegant systematic way of ensuring non-disruptiveness, while the fate of the face-value pleonasticist is tied to a reductive project in the theory of propositional attitudes.

instance, come to know that Ann believes that there is life on Mars by asking her. On the basis of this knowledge and our conceptual competence, we can validly infer and, thus, come to know (14). Likewise for other propositional attitude and speech act ascriptions. In this way, facts about truth and contenthood of propositions turn out to be based on facts that do not concern propositions, and Schiffer's claim that propositions are 'thin and inconsequential', fundamentally non-disruptive, is resubstantiated.²⁰

Extending the base also helps unify our theory. Clearly, if belief reports do not refer to propositions at all, no account of propositions needs to explain in which way 'that'-clause *designators* that occur as the complements of 'believes' in belief reports differ from run-of-the-mill singular terms. So, the second part of Schiffer's account of propositions can simply be dropped, thereby restoring unity. But we can do even better: we can explain why one might initially have thought the second part was required, simply by appeal to belief reports and their pleonastic equivalents. Reconsider the alleged differences between propositional designators in belief reports and ordinary singular terms listed on pp. 4ff.

Re i)

8 Ann believes that Hesperus is a planet.

does not contain a singular term for a proposition, and, thus, the alleged difference between it and usual sentences in the order of referent-identification and evaluation does not obtain: the only candidates for being referential terms contained in (8) are 'Ann' and 'Hesperus', and, typically, an evaluation of (8) proceeds by *first* identifying the referents of these terms. But now consider the conclusion of the propositional something-from-nothing transformation whose premise is (8), i.e.

14 The proposition that Hesperus is a planet is the content of one of Ann's beliefs.

Again, (14) does not differ from ordinary sentences in the order of referent-identification and evaluation. In particular, (i) in order to evaluate the sentence, we have to first determine the referent of its singular terms, including '[Hesperus is a planet]'; and (ii) in order to identify the referent of the proposition designator contained in the sentence, we do *not* first have to evaluate *that very sentence*. However, since (14) is the conclusion of a something-from-nothing transformation whose premise is (8), we will typically have to evaluate (8) in order to evaluate (14), and, by the same token, to identify the referent of its proposition designator. The illusion that there is some difference vis-à-vis reference-identification and evaluation springs from a conflation of (8) and (14), the premise and conclusion of a propositional-content something-from-nothing transformation.

²⁰Künne (2003: 249ff.) also sees a close conceptual link between premises and conclusions of the something-from-nothing transformations advocated in the main text. However, he combines this insight with an endorsement of the face-value theory (Künne 2003: 253ff.), which bars him from recognizing their premises as the non-proposition involving grounds of our proposition talk.

Re ii) There are no conscious referential intentions vis-a-vis a proposition in the case of (8), since no reference takes place. However, arguably, in the case of (14) there are conscious referential intentions. A speaker who uses (14) will typically intend to refer to whatever proposition figures in the conclusion of the propositional-content something-from-nothing transformation (8) gives rise to.

Re iii) Correlatively, there is a condition C the satisfaction of which suffices for being the referent of the proposition designator contained in (14) which is independent of the truth-conditions of (14): $C(x, y)$ is, roughly, *y's being the proposition referred to in the conclusion of the propositional-content something-from-nothing transformation whose premise follows the complementizer 'that' in x*.

Re iv) Since the 'that'-clause in (8) is not a singular term, it is a fortiori not a *complex* singular term, and no puzzle arises regarding the determination of its reference via the references of its component expressions. (14) on the other hand contains a propositional designator, but it is doubtful that it is best conceived of as a semantically complex singular term on the order of 'the father of Colin'. Suppose '[Hesperus is a planet]' is not semantically complex as it occurs in (14).²¹ We have to be able to understand the embedded sentence 'Hesperus is a planet' in order to understand the propositional designator '[Hesperus is a planet]' in (14). But this can be explained without appeal to semantic complexity of the the propositional designator: by noting that (14) is the conclusion of a something-from-nothing transformation from a premise that genuinely uses the sentence. In order to understand the singular term that figures in the conclusion we need to be able to understand its premise, and, thus, have to be able to understand the semantic constituents of 'Hesperus is a planet' even if '[Hesperus is a planet]' has no semantically significant constituents as it occurs in (14) (just as it has no semantically significant constituents as it occurs between quotation marks). If so, it is not surprising that the referent of 'Hesperus' (in that context), for instance, does not play a role in determining the reference of '[Hesperus is a planet]'.

Re v) Finally, although the identity and individuation of the proposition referred to in (14) owes everything to the truth-conditions of (8), it is not in this way dependent on the truth-conditions of (14) itself. It is not the case that the proposition that Hesperus is a planet is distinct from the proposition that Phosphorus is a planet because (14) and

16 [Phosphorus is a planet] is the content of one of Ann's beliefs;

may differ in truth-value. Correlatively, we may not come to know that the propositions are distinct by noting that (14) and (16) may differ in truth-value. Rather, we know this because we know that a pertinent utterance of (8) may differ in truth-value from an utterance of

11 Ann believes that Phosphorus is a planet;

²¹Actually, *this* assumption is rather implausible, since, recall, '[...]' abbreviates 'the proposition that ...'. What is less implausible is that the embedded 'that'-clause has no semantically significant parts. In order not to complicate the discussion I stuck to the less plausible assumption to make my point.

But (8) and (11) do not already contain singular terms for the propositions whose identity or difference is in question.

We saw above that proponents of the face value theory attempt to motivate the view by appeal to three kinds of arguments. We also saw that there is an explication of the validity of two of the three arguments that is independent of the face value theory. Extending the base helps shed light on the third that we passed over in the last section:

2. (P1) Ann believes that there is life on Mars. (P2) That there is life on Mars is Ben's theory. Therefore, (C) Ann believes Ben's theory.

According to the view arrived at, the 'that'-clause in (P1) does not refer to a proposition. If, as intended, (P2) is a true identity statement – a view I do not wish to quarrel with here²² – the 'that'-clause in (P2) has to be a singular term that refers to a proposition that is also Ben's theory, to wit: the proposition that there is life on Mars. Since the two occurrences of the 'that'-clause function differently in the two premises, it is illegitimate to translate them with the same symbol, whether it is translation into the language of predicate logic or into any other unambiguous language that is at issue. Thus, our chances of showing that (2) is formally valid are rather slim. Nevertheless, our position helps us explain the *material* validity of the argument: it is impossible for its premises to be true unless its conclusion is true, though this is not only due to the argument's logical form. For, if (P1) is true, the pertinent propositional-content something-from-nothing transformation yields that

- 17 [There is life on Mars] is the content of one of Ann's beliefs.

Now, given (P2), by a legitimate use of identity elimination,

- 18 Ben's theory is the content of one of Ann's beliefs.

And, given the plausible principle that in the pertinent transitive use of 'believe', x believes y just in case y is the content of one of x 's beliefs,²³ we end up with the argument's conclusion (C). Thus, on the view presented here, the last argument whose validity was meant to support the face value theory is valid, too. But its validity is not a formal matter. Instead, an explanation of its validity has to appeal to the pertinent propositional-content something-from-nothing transformation. Since pre-theoretic intuition makes no pronouncements on the question whether the argument's validity is formal or material, however, nothing worth saving is lost by discarding the face value theory.

*Objection.*²⁴ This is all well and good. But the whole discussion rests on the assumption that

²²But see Felka (2014) for reasons to mistrust philosophers' classifications on such matters.

²³Graeme Forbes (forthcoming) conflates the use of 'believes' in 'Ann believes him' with the one used here: 'believing a proposition', Forbes writes, 'is believing what it says', just like believing a witness is believing what she says. Translation into German suggests that these uses can, and presumably should, be distinguished: in 'Anne glaubt ihm' (*Ann believes him*), 'ihm' is in the dative case, in 'Anne glaubt den Satz des Pythagoras' (*Ann believes the Pythagorean Theorem*), 'den Satz des Pythagoras' is accusative.

²⁴Thanks to a referee for this journal who pushed this objection.

8 Ann believes that Hesperus is a planet;

and

14 The proposition that Hesperus is a planet is the content of one of Ann's beliefs;

express different propositions. Isn't it obvious that these sentences are mere stylistic variants of each other, where in using the latter we're saying exactly the same thing – though in a somewhat more pompous way – as we would have done had we used the former? If so, it will be hard to maintain that there is a referential difference between the 'that'-clause in (8) and the proposition-designator in (14): A (trivial) inference from (8) to (14) will turn out to be either something-from-*something* (if both refer) or *nothing*-from-nothing (if neither does).

Reply. The force of the objection turns on the plausibility of the claim that (8) and (14) (in their pertinent uses) are mere stylistic variants of each other. Let me start by noting that the denial of this view does not entail that we can *never* refer to a proposition by using an unadorned 'that'-clause, even following the verb 'believe'. Perhaps in some (philosophers') uses of sentence (8) it is a mere stylistic variant of the proposition-referring sentence (14). Correlatively, we do not have to claim that *every* use of a term of the form 'the proposition that *p*' refers to a proposition, even in the context of the predicate 'is the content of one of Ann's beliefs'. Perhaps there are also non-committal uses of (14), in which it is a mere stylistic variant of the simple belief ascription in its non-proposition-referring use. The point is: Denial of the face-value theory allows us to say that the truth of either of the two sentences *in its proposition-referring reading* is based on the truth of either of the two sentences in its nonreferential reading, in which (8) is used in ordinary belief reports.

The objector might retort that there simply is no reading of (8) and (14) in which they are anything but mere stylistic variants. How should we decide such a claim? Linguistic intuitions do not seem to be a reliable guide here. All sides agree that the meanings of the two sentences are very closely related. I doubt that any sort of pre-theoretic consideration will be sensitive enough to the difference between mere stylistic variation and pleonastic equivalence to decide the issue (while, as argued above, theoretic considerations pull in the opposite direction). In any event, the pleonasticist herself should be hesitant to appeal to (alleged) intuitions here, if she wants her theory to have any interesting applications at all. Take for instance the case of properties. According to Schiffer (2003: 61), simple predications like 'Fido is a dog' are the non-property-referring premises of something-from-nothing property transformations whose conclusions are property ascriptions like 'Fido has the property of being a dog'. But, of course, many philosophers have claimed on broadly intuitive grounds that simple predications and corresponding property ascriptions are mere stylistic variants of each other.²⁵ Likewise, as we saw above, according to Schiffer (2003: 71), truth ascriptions like 'The proposition that Fido is a dog is true' are

²⁵See Künne (2006: §IV) for discussion and references.

the conclusions of something-from-nothing proposition-transformations whose premises are the embedded sentences (in this case: ‘Fido is a dog’). But, of course, many philosophers have claimed on broadly intuitive grounds that (revealing) truth-ascriptions and the corresponding embedded sentences are mere stylistic variants of each other.²⁶ The pleonasticist should resist these claims of mere stylistic variation. But if she does, why should she agree to it in the case of propositional attitude ascriptions like (8) and explicit content ascriptions like (14)?

Let’s sum up. The face value theory of propositional attitude ascriptions is not mandatory. Rejecting it amounts to denying that ‘that’-clauses in propositional attitude ascriptions function as singular terms that refer to propositions. This allows us to recognize such propositional attitude ascriptions as part of our basis for something-from-nothing proposition-transformations: as statements in which no reference to propositions is made, and which license the move to statements in which propositions are referred to, namely explicit content ascriptions. Recognizing these further something-from-nothing transformations results in a pleonastic account of propositions that is preferable to Schiffer’s own in several respects. For one, the resulting theory can plausibly maintain that propositions so conceived have no untowards influence on the non-pleonastic realm, and, thus, conforms to the idea that pleonastic propositions are fundamentally non-disruptive. Secondly, the resulting theory is of a piece and can explain the distinctive features of propositions and our talk about them simply by appeal to their pleonastic nature, rather than by resorting to otherwise unmotivated theoretical addenda. Since nothing much is lost and considerable plausibility is gained for the pleonastic account, I conclude that the pleonasticist about propositions should reject the face value theory of propositional attitude ascriptions.

The results reached here with respect to pleonastic propositions generalize to other accounts of propositions as derivative entities in a straightforward way. If you think that propositions are derivative, you should not take propositional attitude ascriptions to ascribe relations between thinkers and propositions. For, otherwise you will be forced to recognize non-classificatory and highly non-trivial truths about propositions that have no grounds in more fundamental truths. But if an account of derivative entities allows ungrounded relational truths about them, it is unclear why the remark that propositions are derivative should alleviate anyone’s worries.²⁷

²⁶A classic reference is Frege (1918/1993: 34).

²⁷I’d like to thank Ralf Busse, Katharina Felka, Hanjo Glock, Nick Haverkamp, three referees for this journal as well as the participants of research colloquia in Mainz, Zurich, Constance, Uppsala, Stockholm and Geneva for helpful discussion of the paper at various stages of completion. I gratefully acknowledge support from the University of Zurich’s *Forschungskredit* (grant number FK-16-078).

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