

## Psychology and Semantics: Comments on Schiffer's "Intention-Based Semantics"

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Schiffer gives the phrase "intention-based semantics" a peculiar sense, which lets him use it as the title of a paper that is not about the semantics of natural languages—the topic to which this special number of the *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic* is dedicated. In his usage, the phrase "intention-based semantics" names the thesis that semantic properties *are* psychological properties—that is, roughly speaking, that meaning is a complex constructed out of belief and desire. He is inclined to accept this thesis, on the strength of two others:

- (i) a Gricean theory to the effect that whatever is said about meaning is logically equivalent to something said about beliefs and desires
- (ii) the thesis that belief and desire can be explicated without bringing in the concept of meaning.

Of these, (i) is relevant to this special issue of the *Notre Dame Journal*, and ten years ago Schiffer contributed significantly to it in his book *Meaning*. But in this paper he doesn't contribute much more; and indeed he now coolly declares (i) to be "barely of passing interest" unless it helps to establish

- (iii) the thesis that meaning *is* a construct out of belief and desire, not merely logically equivalent to such a construct,

which Schiffer sees as interesting because of the part it can play in a reduction of semantics to psychology and of that to neurology or whatever. Thus, we can still be interested in Gricean meaning theory even if we modishly wish to "have no truck with conceptual analysis", for it bears on an issue that is now at the centre of the stage: namely, the metaphysics of materialism. Schiffer does not

explain his distinction between necessary equivalence and identity, which underlies his decision to reserve the label "intention-based semantics" not for the boring (i) but for the important (iii); nor does he explain why, if there is a gap between (i) and (iii), what fills it is (ii).

Anyway, whatever the reasons for it, there the picture is: Gricean meaning-theory is only a part of Schiffer's topic; and after devoting Part I to a quick run through that, he devotes the rest of his paper to the thesis (ii) that "the correct theory" of mind will not essentially bring in any semantic concepts. This is an inquiry not into meaning but into mind.

Still, Schiffer does try in a couple of ways to make (i), Gricean theory, relevant to (ii), other than merely as something to be conjoined with it to yield (iii). One alleged relevance is mysterious: someone wanting to answer questions about the nature of mental content will, if he comes to accept a Gricean theory, be "free now to pursue those answers without any further appeal to . . . semantical properties". I cannot see why Schiffer says this, or even what it means. When I am trying to explicate the concepts of belief and desire, I can—Schiffer seems to say—leave semantic concepts out of it because Gricean theory gives me that "freedom", i.e., permits me to exclude them. But if I cannot do the job without including them, the Gricean permission is useless to me; and if I can do it without using semantic concepts then that fact is itself my permission to leave them out, whatever Gricean theory says.

The other relevance is clearer: Schiffer tries in two different ways to use (i) Gricean meaning-theory to *support* (ii) the thesis that the correct theory of mind will not mention anything semantical. That completes the program for making old Gricean meaning theory relevant to the 1980s; it is to have a role not only in the metaphysics of materialism but also in the philosophy of cognitive psychology.

Of course the best way to support (ii) would be to produce and defend a theory of mind which perceptibly does not use any such concept as that of meaning; but Schiffer admits that he has no such theory. So he undertakes to do "the next best thing", which is to talk about possible theories of belief—about general constraints they must meet and jobs they must do—trying to create a presumption that the best one will not essentially involve any semantic concepts. When Schiffer pursues this discussion through Parts III, IV, and V, his discussion is necessarily inconclusive, as he admits. His paper's most striking feature is how frequently it uses such turns of phrase as "The only prima facie feasible line for one to take . . .", "I can think of only three candidates . . .", "It is plausible to suppose . . .", "The only argument of which I am cognizant . . .", "Should I be forced to do so at gun point I should bet . . .", ". . . reasons for being more than a little skeptical . . .", "The lack of any viable candidate . . .", and so on.

However, in addition to that sort of thing he also—as I was saying a paragraph back—argues more directly from the truth of (i) Gricean meaning theory to (ii) the thesis that psychology does not rest on semantics. About two-thirds of the way through Part II this is argued for in a loose, suggestive way, as follows. If there were a psychological theory *T* in which "meaning" or one of its kin occurred, we could form a new theory *T\** by replacing 'meaning' throughout *T* by its psychological equivalent in accordance with Gricean

theory. Then  $T^*$  would be a psychological theory containing nothing semantic; and Schiffer asks what “objective, determinate sense” it could make to claim that  $T$  is the correct theory and thus to deny that  $T^*$  “would do just as well”. That claim could be justified, he thinks, only if there were no such  $T^*$  logically equivalent to  $T$ , i.e., only if no Gricean theory of meaning was correct; and so by contraposition the success of Gricean analyses of meaning in terms of belief, etc., counts against the view that belief has to be analysed with help from the concept of meaning.

If Schiffer really means to question the *sense* of the claim, he ought also to question the sense of his own distinction between theses (i) and (iii). Let us take him only to be asking how it could be *true*, if  $T$  and  $T^*$  are logically equivalent, that  $T$  and not  $T^*$  is somehow the basic truth of the matter. Well, I can see how it might be true. There could be reasons for holding that although talk about meaning is shorthand for certain sorts of talk about belief and desire, we couldn’t manage the latter concepts at all unless we sometimes used them in that form of shorthand. That would be analogous to the position of a phenomenalist who thought that any language-user must sometimes refer to physical objects. But I shan’t linger on this argument of Schiffer’s, because he doesn’t.

Instead, he steps straight from his conclusion that  $T^*$  will “do just as well” as  $T$  to something much stronger. The former thesis “strongly suggests”, he says, that “the functional theory which defines belief—assuming that there is such a theory—will contain no semantical concepts”. This bewildering remark is offered as though it could stand on its own, as though anyone who cocks an attentive ear will catch the “strong suggestion”. But never mind; Schiffer also proceeds to support it with a long, difficult argument, again using (i) Gricean theory as a premise, but this time “laying claim to a certain degree of rigor”. After much labour I think I understand this argument, and shall now report and assess it.

It concerns the same  $T$  and  $T^*$  as before. Schiffer assumes that if  $T$  is to be the correct theory of belief, desire, and meaning, it must be capable of supporting a certain kind of definition of those three terms. It is a kind developed by Lewis, and its details don’t concern us here; all that matters is that a theory supporting such a definition must be expressed in the form of a Ramsey sentence. The way to express our theory  $T$  as a Ramsey sentence is as follows: write out the entire theory as a vast conjunction of statements about how belief, desire, and meaning relate to one another and to the inputs and outputs of organisms; then throughout the theory replace ‘belief’ by  $x$ , ‘desire’ by  $y$ , and ‘meaning’ by  $z$ ; then preface the entire thing with “There are values of  $x$ ,  $y$ , and  $z$  such that . . .”. Instead of saying about those three properties that *they* interrelate in certain ways, the Ramsified theory says that *there is a triple of properties which have such-and-such relations with one another*. That just is—never mind why—the form  $T$  must take if it is to support Lewis-type definitions of its key terms. Similarly, our theory  $T^*$  about belief and desire must be of the form *There is a pair of properties that are related thus-and-so*.

One might challenge the assumption that if  $T$  is “the correct theory” of mind it must support Lewis-type definitions of its terms and must therefore be

expressible as a Ramsey sentence. But I shall accept everything in the argument up to here; it's the next bit that I stick at. Schiffer contends, just on the strength of those abstract characterizations of  $T$  and  $T^*$  when expressed as Ramsey sentences, that if they can be thus expressed then  $T$  does not entail  $T^*$ .

Before scrutinizing that, let us glide on down the smooth path to the end of the argument. We are assuming that some Gricean theory is true, and that on the strength of it we have constructed a  $T^*$  which is logically equivalent to  $T$ , and therefore is entailed by  $T$ . But the assumption that  $T$  supports Lewis-style definitions of its key terms, and is thus expressible as a Ramsey sentence, has led to the conclusion that  $T$  does not entail  $T^*$ ; so the assumption is wrong, and  $T$  cannot support such definitions. But  $T$  was a randomly chosen theory of belief, desire, and meaning; so we must conclude that *no* such theory can support Lewis-style definitions of its key terms, which implies that no such theory is "the correct theory" of mind. That means that psychology does not stand upon or essentially involve semantics, i.e., that thesis (ii) is true. Q.e.d.

Now let us go back to the astonishing claim that if  $T$  and  $T^*$  were expressed as Ramsey sentences,  $T$  would not entail  $T^*$ . Schiffer holds that the existence of a *such-and-such triple* of properties could not entail the existence of a *thus-and-so pair*. If there is an entailment between  $T$  and  $T^*$ , he says, "the entailment obtains by virtue of the [Gricean] definability of 'meaning' in terms of 'belief' and 'desire', which gets lost when we existentially generalize on those terms". His point is that in the Ramsified theories nothing is said about belief, etc., in particular—all we have are propositions of the form "There is a property which . . .".

If this argument were sound, it would be immeasurably powerful and important. Nothing in it turns on the fact that we are dealing with psychology and semantics in particular, so that if the argument succeeded here it would succeed everywhere: hardly any pairs of equivalent theories could be expressed as Ramsey sentences, since in Ramsified form they could not be equivalent. Something must have gone wrong.

The argument is invalid because it says "The entailment obtains because . . ." and takes this to imply "The entailment obtains only because . . .". But  $T$  could entail  $T^*$  also for reasons not involving an appeal to belief, desire, and meaning. After all, some propositions quantifying over triples do entail propositions quantifying over pairs. Using "is included in" to mean "is possessed by everything which possesses", we can say for instance that the proposition: *There is a triple of properties such that the first is included in the second, the second in the third, and the third in the first* entails the proposition: *There is a pair of coextensive properties*. Of course,  $T$  and  $T^*$  will say more complex things than that about their respective triple and pair, but complexity as such is not a threat to there being entailments between them. Schiffer thinks he can deny that there is an entailment without looking *into* the two theories at all; but he can't, and so his argument collapses.

Not only *could* there be another basis for the entailment to hold: if the procedures have been competently carried out there *will* be another basis. If  $T$  is fit to be Ramsified, then it must spell out all the relationships amongst belief, desire, and meaning—and between them and the inputs and outputs of organisms—which make belief, desire, and meaning what they are. When that

has been done, the analytic relations between meaning on the one hand and belief and desire on the other will be captured by the total set of relationships, and will thus still be present when we form our Ramsey sentence, replacing a complex statement about those three properties by a statement saying that there is a triple of properties that . . . , etc. That is, a satisfactory  $T$  will have the form  $R(\text{belief, desire, meaning})$  for a value of  $R$  which entitles us to say that for any  $x, y, z$  if  $R(x, y, z)$  then  $x$  is belief,  $y$  is desire, and  $z$  is meaning. I am not here importing some fancy criterion of my own for  $T$ 's being acceptable, but merely relying on Schiffer's own requirement that "the correct theory" of mind be: (a) *functionalist*, meaning that it must treat of belief, desire, etc., by relating them to one another and to the inputs and outputs of organisms, and (b) *Ramsifiable*, meaning that it must lay down such a dense network of relations that nothing but belief, desire, etc., can be fitted into it. Condition (a) requires the theory to state relations amongst belief, desire, etc., and (b) requires the total pattern of relations to be necessarily unique to belief, desire, etc.

Now, we have a  $T$  which *ex hypothesi* entails  $T^*$ , and the question is whether there is a Ramsified functionalist version of  $T$  which also entails  $T^*$ . Well, of course, any *version* of  $T$  (anything which says all that  $T$  says) will entail  $T^*$ ; so our question is just whether the content of  $T$  can be captured in a Ramsey sentence of the required kind. Schiffer will have to say that it can't be done, i.e., that  $T$  could not possibly be expressed as a Ramsey sentence which was true for, and only for, the values  $x = \text{belief}$ ,  $y = \text{desire}$ ,  $z = \text{meaning}$ . But for *this* he offers no argument whatsoever. His only actual argument is patently based on his having overlooked the possibility I am discussing. He takes the fact that  $T^*$  cannot be derived from Ramsified  $T$  via Gricean theory as proving that it can't be derived from it at all. His only attempt at support for this non sequitur is an illustration (about oculists and eye-doctors) of the obvious fact that existential generalization, i.e., the Ramsey-like move from  $Fa$  to  $(\exists x)Fx$ , *sometimes* involves loss of content. But Schiffer needs to say that it *always* involves loss of content; for if he admits that sometimes it doesn't, he can no longer deny that Ramsified  $T$  entails  $T^*$  without looking at what  $T$  says. He does not argue that existential generalization always involves loss of content, of course, because he doesn't believe that it does. If he believed that, he would not be an enthusiast for Lewis-type definitions and thus for theories expressed in Ramsey sentences. So, as I said, what we have here is not doctrine but oversight.

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