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# Prospects for a Deflationary Account of the Ontology of Propositions

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

PROSPECTS FOR A DEFLATIONARY ACCOUNT OF THE ONTOLOGY OF  
PROPOSITIONS

By

Michael P. McCracken

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty  
of the University of Miami  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

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PROPOSITIONS

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A proposition ontology occupies a potentially rich and foundational place in a good deal of contemporary philosophical theorizing. Some of the biggest roadblocks to a wider acceptance and employment of propositions have been legitimate worries about their nature, or ontological status, and the purported “explanatory” power of theories that employ them. This dissertation attempts to understand and construct a deflationary or minimalist understanding of the notion of a proposition and its theoretical roles. On the basis of this understanding, following Stephen Schiffer (2003), I attempt to construct an ontology of propositions –focusing on general propositions– which avoids or dissolves the most pressing worries about their ontological nature, and the epistemological and explanatory statuses of propositions. In chapter one, I discuss the primary theoretical motivations for positing propositions, and argue for a general set of ontological constraints that fall out of a consideration of entities posited according to these motivations. In chapter two, after arguing that propositions are substantially ontologically independent of mind and language, I argue that propositions are conceptually mind- dependent, but that conceptual dependence of this kind does not amount to any sort of ontological dependence. In chapter three, drawing heavily on the

work of Stephen Schiffer (2003), I substantially address the epistemological worries about propositions, arguing that propositions are pleonastic entities whose natures and existence we can know simply by reflecting on our proposition- introducing linguistic practices. In chapter four, I argue that propositions may or may not, in virtue of their status as pleonastic entities, play any substantial explanatory role, but that by utilizing the notion of a proposition, which, according to the pleonastic conception of them, guarantees their existence independent of our practices, is useful and perhaps indispensable to certain of our communicative and epistemic practices. Our propositional linguistic practices, involving essentially our reference to propositions, are thus pragmatically justified.

## Dedication.

I dedicate this dissertation to three people in no particular order. My Dad, Patrick McCracken, whose love, support, strength, and shining example of hard work and dedication to everything I've seen him do has been essential to my development as a person and been a sort of guidepost and standard throughout my struggles, personal and professional. My Mom, Colleen Thurnherr, whose love, support, care, warmth and kindness, have been a comfort and beacon throughout my life, and whose often sympathetic ear has helped me simply come to grips and work out many of my own problems. Finally, Michelle Carpenter, my other half and true love, whose love, commitment, friendship, and unwavering support has in many ways made my life bearable throughout (but not limited to) my extended academic pursuits. She has had to bear most fully, throughout my graduate education, the darkest of my psychic burdens, and still her love and kindness shine through, pointing the way to what matters most. In truth, there really are no words to express all the appreciation I have for each of the unique gifts of love and care I unfailingly accept and feel from each of you, but I hope you all know how much I love and appreciate you.



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My second great debt in this dissertation is to Stephen Schiffer, whose work on pleonastic ontology over the past decade and a half has been from my perspective the most interesting and challenging development in the ontology of propositions. His pleonastic conception has provided my main inspiration to delve into this topic, and if you read on you will see that for the most part, I have followed him closely on the central program of research for investigating the ontology and relevance of propositions. In addition to leading the way into the investigation of proposition ontology, I owe Professor Schiffer many thanks for being on my dissertation committee

and giving all sorts of useful criticism to earlier drafts, where arguments and expositions were always carefully read and considered.

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Last, but certainly not least, I would also like to thank my Aunt Peg, Dr. Margaret Addesa. Her moral support, guidance, and advice over the past few years has proven invaluable, often allowing me to pick it up again when I was disheartened and disillusioned. Her sympathy, support, gentle motivation, and sagely advice are all major reasons that I have been able to push through further revisions and setbacks in this past year –and I am eternally grateful for them.

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## Chapter 1: The Ontology of Propositions: Motivations and Problems

A proposition ontology, despite the perennially controversial status it has weathered for over a century, occupies a potentially rich and foundational place in a good deal of contemporary philosophical theorizing. Some of the biggest roadblocks to a wider acceptance and employment of the concept of propositions has been legitimate worries about their nature, or ontological status, and the purported “explanatory” power of theories that employ them. This dissertation is premised on the hope that something like a minimalist theory of the nature of propositions might have the resources to deal with these worries in a novel and interesting way. Many of the things said by minimalists (most notably, Stephen Schiffer), seem to be aimed at deflating the metaphysical issues about their natures and ontological status, with the seeming benefit of avoiding the epistemological quandaries usually associated by Platonism about propositions and abstracta generally. For instance, propositions are sometimes talked about in such a way as to suggest that they are ontologically mind- or language- dependent: they are “Language- created language- independent entities (title of Schiffer 1996); they “exist alright, not merely *in* a manner of speaking, but...somehow as a result of a manner of speaking.” (1996, 153). Ontologically, propositions are held to be the metaphorical shadows of sentences, with the consequence that there is nothing more to their natures than what is determined by our linguistic practices of talking about propositions (1996, 153, 161; 2003, 59-60, 63). In addition, they are claimed to be such that we can know they exist a priori (Schiffer, 2003, 60). As will become evident, figuring out how best to understand such deflationary ways of speaking is itself an involved, if fruitful task.

Nevertheless, after a solid review of the basics of general proposition theory and a brief survey of its traditional problems and contemporary status, I will be principally involved in taking minimalism about propositions seriously concerning the ontological and epistemological issues that face it

This chapter begins with an examination of what I take to be the standard initial motivations traditionally offered for taking seriously the thesis that there are propositions. This examination reveals that positing something like what 20th century analytic philosophers have called propositions seems to be required in order to “explain” certain facts about our linguistic,<sup>1</sup> doxastic, and epistemic practices, as well as our common convictions about logic. In the second part of this chapter, I begin to examine the ontological picture we inherit when we are compelled, for the reasons given in the first section, to posit the existence of propositions. Traditionally, this has been thought to be an ontology of abstract, necessary, and mind and language- independent entities, occupying neither the physical nor mental world, but some sort of other “third realm.”<sup>2</sup> But this sort of ontological picture invites criticism, some of which might serve as a basis for rejecting proposition theory altogether, and may be thought to inspire development and/ or revision. In the third section of this chapter, I will examine some of the more serious ontological and epistemological problems for traditional proposition theory. In the fourth and final section I will review some of the most widely known and traditionally employed theories on the nature and status of propositions, and their main ontological problems.

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<sup>1</sup> The scare quotes indicate my suspicions about the use of the term “explain” and its cognates as applied to certain sorts of entities and principles in metaphysical theories. More on this below.

<sup>2</sup> Frege, “The Thought: A Logical Inquiry”. 1919.

## 1. Why should we admit propositions into our ontology?

Propositions are variously invoked as the contents of our utterances and certain mental states, the objects of our propositional attitudes, the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity, and the referents of that- clauses. In part, we can say this because the “received view” of propositions is that they just are the kinds of things which play these theoretical roles, and that when philosophers use the term “proposition,” this is just (at least part of) what they mean. But ultimately, contemporary philosophers speak this way because the term “proposition” was introduced precisely in order to name a sort of abstract entity the existence of which, it was argued, is required in order to account for the truth of certain presuppositions or philosophical theories about logic, language, and our mental states. Below we will begin to see first, some good initial reasons for taking proposition theory seriously, and secondly, when all of these considerations are laid out, the power and attractiveness of proposition theory as a way to make sense of many of our practices and deeply held convictions.

*1.1. General argument pattern.* Before making any claims on behalf of propositions, it will be important to call attention to a specific sort of argument that has traditionally been used –if perhaps only implicitly, to support proposition theory. Many of the arguments discussed below, to the effect that there are abstract propositions, can be thought to follow a certain pattern. The pattern looks something like this:

- 1) P (e.g. where P is the existence of some phenomena, or is a presupposition that some central and important theory might seem ill-founded without).

- 2) P is not primitive; the possibility of P requires some sort of explanation.<sup>3</sup>
- 3) If there are *F*'s, it would explain/account for P.
- 4) The existence of nothing other than *F*'s could explain/account for P, or alternatively, among the possible sorts of things proposed to account for P, positing *F*'s is preferable or superior.
- 5) Therefore, there are *F*'s.

As an example of this kind of argument, which might be used for a substantially metaphysical conclusion, consider the following generic sort of argument, which might be offered by a “realist” about universals (see Loux 1998, Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion).

- 1) Similarity (attribute agreement) is a real feature of the world.
- 2) But the fact that things are similar is not a primitive feature of the world; the very possibility of similarity requires some sort of explanation.
- 3) If there are universals (e.g. multiply exemplifiable colors, shapes, etc), that would explain the possibility of similarity.
- 4) Nothing other than the existence of multiply exemplifiable abstract universals could explain the possibility of similarity.
- 5) Therefore, there are universals.

One thing we might want to say about such arguments is that, provided they are to be taken seriously at all, they ought to be taken more seriously as they accumulate; the

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<sup>3</sup> Premise 2 in such arguments, as I have formulated it, is usually unstated and taken for granted as implicitly presupposed, but seems no less essential to their validity .

more seemingly correct arguments of this kind that we have toward the same conclusion, and issuing from distinct phenomena and areas of research, the greater the support for the conclusion that the posited entity (or kind of entity) exists. Below I will not always cast the arguments for propositions in such a precise way, but the reader should assume that this could be done without great difficulty.

The key here is not to immediately get lost in the task of evaluating this sort of argument, in metaphysics or any philosophical discipline; much will have to be settled both about the possible natures of propositions and about what we could possibly mean by “explain” in this very abstract, metaphysical context before we can begin to do that. Instead, I simply want to point out that arguments of this kind can be, and have been, given not only in support of the existence of some individual thing (e.g. a planet), but more importantly, for our purposes, also in support for the existence of some *kind* of thing (e.g. a kind of bacteria, or a kind of abstract entity) –such as propositions generally. Such is the case in the above argument for universals. Many of the main arguments for abstract propositions are often thought of as being of this form, and so construed, the cluster of arguments we will consider can seem to amount to an interesting case for taking propositions seriously.

Among the primary issues to be addressed in this dissertation is a concern about the the kind and strength of support that such arguments, cast in the form outlined above, can offer to a theory which posits abstracta like universals and propositions. We might wonder whether, construed in this way, as so-called explanatory inferences, such arguments can offer *any* support for the existence of abstracta like propositions. They might be, as some philosophers of science tell us, a legitimate way of arguing for the



existence of empirically observable things (bacteria, planets, subatomic particles), but we might wonder whether positing abstracta like propositions and universals can really be held to *explain* anything at all, or at least whether the sense in which they are said to explain certain facts is in any way similar to the paradigm cases of explanation in the natural sciences; perhaps sometimes the use of arguments like these in metaphysics and ontology is thought to gain prestige in virtue of its superficial similarity to and association with explanatory arguments in the natural sciences –one way of approximating my concern, assuming that such issues are scientifically valuable, is whether there is any basis for a fruitful analogy there. Later on I will address precisely this sort of worry (in chapter 4), but not before reconstructing the traditional ontological picture or pictures that proposition theory is thought to give us and mapping its logical geography. The arguments given below are primarily offered here in order to survey the traditionally given initial motivations for any theory which posits abstract propositions; our discussion of them here serves merely to ground a discussion of what, traditionally conceived, an ontology of propositions should look like.

*1.2. Propositions as truth-bearers.* Perhaps the most basic reason for admitting propositions into one's ontology originates in issues concerning our understanding of logic. Logical theory studies, among other things, the nature of certain sorts of relations such as entailment, contradiction, compatibility, presupposition, and so on. Let's assume these relations reflect some real features of the mind-independent world –what sorts of things does contradiction or entailment relate? If entailment and contradiction are genuine relations, as I will suppose they are, there must be something among which these

relations hold. Surely it is convenient for us to have a general term for the things which propositional variables stand for in various logical symbolisms, but perhaps propositionalists will need to point to something genuinely underlying the convention (of using variable to represent the objects of logical relations), if it is to be considered anything more than mere convention, as the traditional nominalist might suggest.

The contemporary use of the term ‘proposition’ was introduced precisely in order to name the sorts of things for which such variables, in contemporary symbolisms, stand (Bolzano 1837, 20). Assuming that this is what they’re supposed to stand for, let’s just say, at the present moment, that whatever propositions are, they are the objects of logical relations. It should be clear that whatever occupies a place in the sorts of logical relations mentioned above, must also be truth bearers, or the kinds of things that can be true or false. Consider the relation of contradiction; if A and B are distinct propositions, and they contradict each other, this means that A and B cannot both be true. But in order for this relation to hold amongst A and B, they must be of a kind which is capable of being true or false (Strawson 1950, 4) .

*1.2.1. Logical relata are truth-bearers.* Assuming we already believe in the literal existence of things like sentences, utterances, and beliefs, to which we legitimately apply the predicates “true” and “false”, why should we think that one needs to introduce a distinct notion, that of a proposition, in order to play this role? Our linguistic practices clearly warrant the inclusion of these as objects of entailment, contradiction, and other logical relations; certainly, one can inscribe incompatible sentences and have incompatible beliefs, and this presupposes our practice of calling such things true or false. But there are good reasons for thinking that sentences and beliefs are inadequate to

play these theoretical roles (which, of course, is not to say that there are not already important but distinct roles for sentences and beliefs to play, and hence not to deny that these things exist).

*1.2.1.1. Alternative #1: sentences.* Let us consider sentences first. In doing so, we need to acknowledge the type- token distinction concerning sentences. Sentence types, which are genuine abstract entities, lacking any physical properties or location, are sequences or sets of words ordered in such a way that they conform to the rules of some language. Sentence tokens are the particular physical manifestations (utterances and inscriptions) of sentences, and are essentially located at a time and place. For instance, where A and B are distinct persons, and each, at distinct times or places, utter the following sequence of words: “I am not feeling well,” they utter the same sentence type, but distinct sentence tokens, since their utterances, in virtue of their being distinct, must have at least distinct locations.

It should be clear from the above example why sentence types cannot play the role of truth- bearer, and hence be the relata of entailment, contradiction, and so on. *Qua* sentence type, the sequence “I am not feeling well” is neither true nor false; were we to assume that it is, all by itself, the kind of thing which possesses truth values, we’d not only have to assign it constantly changing truth values (depending on who thought or uttered it at any given time), but we’d also be forced to say that it is both true and false, in the event that two persons, such as A and B, both uttered it, while it was true of A, but false of B that she was not feeling well. But if we want to be able assign a particular kind of entity a consistent truth value, or even a stable one, then it cannot be a sentence type such as the one given above. Where we assume that (and surely, this is an assumption we

do make) the kind of things propositional variables stand for can be discoursed about while remaining (in principle, whatever the linguistic behaviors of human beings) the same truth value and maintaining a stable logical relationship with others of its kind, sentence types cannot play this role.

One might, however, insist that this is not true of all sentence types. W.V.O. Quine (1960, 193) has suggested that certain kinds of sentence types, which he calls *eternal sentences*, can be so constructed as to avoid this difficulty, thereby heading off the intended appeal to nonsentential entities, such as propositions, before the need arises. Eternal sentences are obtained by taking an ordinary sentence, and replacing all tensed verbs with tenseless ones (making it timelessly true or false), and replacing all indexicals, demonstratives, and other terms depending on context for their reference with those that are not, or fully explicit and unique definite descriptions (making it true independently of the context in which its uttered). Should we then acknowledge eternal sentences as a (perhaps more metaphysically innocuous and familiar) rival to abstract propositions as truth bearers? This is no place to develop a comprehensive examination of Quine's proposal, but there are some *prima facie* reasons we might be suspicious of it, issuing from concerns about demonstratives and indexicality. As others have pointed out (Lemmon 1966, 102) there is simply no guarantee (and perhaps sufficient reason to doubt) that, for every context- dependent reference made in a sentence type, a definite description or proper name can be found to replace it such that it refers uniquely to the object independently of context. And as we will see below, aside from their role as truth-bearers, there are other theoretical roles, such as that of explaining our translation practices, which sentence- types cannot possibly fulfill.

Sentence tokens then become the leading candidate for an alternative to propositions as truth-bearers. We can make short work of these by considering the following sort of example. Suppose A utters to B “I’m not feeling well,” and then lays down to take a nap on the floor. Later C walks into the room, and B, in an effort to explain why A is sleeping, in the middle of the day at the office, says to C “A is not feeling well.” No doubt the sentence-token uttered by B is true if and only if the sentence token uttered by A is, and that this is because A and B have, despite having uttered tokens of distinct sentences, said the same thing. Their utterances are logically equivalent, and this would seem to require an explanation (it can’t be a primitive feature of the world that these two utterances are logically equivalent). The most intuitive way of dealing with this is to take seriously the thought that each literally expresses the same thing,<sup>4</sup> and this is done easily by saying that in uttering sentence tokens we express propositions. Propositions are that in virtue of which, by uttering sentences, we say something true or false, since they are the bearers of truth and falsity (Frege 1919, 291). What explains the logical equivalence between A and B’s utterances, then, is that each expresses the same proposition.

*1.2.1.2. Alternative #2: beliefs.* Why, then, should we not consider beliefs as the ultimate bearers of truth and falsity? Of course, the term “belief” in sentences such as “S’s belief that P” is ambiguous between the *state* of S’s believing that P, on one hand, and the *content* of S’s belief that P, characterized simply as *that P*. If the proposal is that we consider S’s state of believing that P as being true or false, the worry is that we lapse into nonsense, since it seems like a category mistake to call anyone’s mental *state* true or

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, phrases like “what A said”, or “B said the same thing as A” are notoriously ambiguous; All I am claiming here is that in the situation described, A and B instantiate one sense of the second phrase.

false. Perhaps this is to beg the question, though. The more important reason to reject this proposal comes from the fact that we can make a state/content distinction in the first place (Bolzano 1837, 20-21). For what is it, we may ask, in virtue of which we might call S's state true or false (if indeed we can), but that the content of her belief, is true? It must be the content of that mental state, that P, in virtue of which we call it true or false. But to say this is merely to divorce the truth-bearer from the subjective state, belief, so that it looks as if we're just using the term "belief," construed as the content of such subjective states, as another name for the very things, propositions, we're considering reasons for taking seriously. So talking about belief in this way doesn't eliminate the need to posit distinct truth-bearers. And as we'll see, it is just this notion of content which provides us with a framework for discussing the role of propositions in the philosophy of language and mind (more on this below).

Propositions, or something of the sort, then seem required to fill certain theoretical gaps in our interpretations of logic (e.g. as applying to something, which propositional variables range over), and crucially ground some of the key presuppositions to the coherency of our practice of applying it. Most importantly, it seems propositions, thought of as truth bearers and contents, play a key role here as the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity; propositions, or something like them, if they are to be the stable truth bearers we assume our use of propositional variables to range over, must also be that in virtue of which any other derivative truth-bearers, such as sentences and beliefs, become true or false. And as we will see, this conclusion meshes well with conclusions issuing from traditionally given considerations of content in the philosophy of language and mind.

*1.3. Propositions as contents of mental states and of propositional attitudes.* Among the most common reasons for taking propositions seriously issues from interrelated considerations in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind (Bolzano, 1837; Frege 1892, 1919; Stalnaker 1964, 1984; Moore 1953; Schiffer, 1996, 2003). It appears that only something of the nature of an abstract proposition can serve as the common content of our utterances and the contents of the mental states we typically express in making such utterances.

*1.3.1. Intentionality and the state/content distinction.* Certain of our conscious mental states now called *propositional attitudes*, such as understanding, belief, doubt, hope, and desire, have a feature which we might call *directedness*; that is, being in one or another of these mental states essentially consists in (or in some cases, presuppose at one time or other) having one's consciousness directed at something beyond oneself.

Directedness is an intrinsic feature of many of these states. One way of arguing for the existence of distinct contents is by way of what I'll call the state/content distinction. Let's suppose, for instance, that Mike believes that hand-rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory-made ones. We can and typically do describe the state of affairs of Mike's having this belief by using sentences of the form 'S believes that P'. Now, it seems correct to say that when we describe these states of affairs in this way, we can make a clear distinction between the state that S (Mike) is in, namely belief, and that towards which the state is directed, that P (that hand-rolled cigarettes...etc.). And this would appear to apply to all of the propositional attitudes in general, since it is just as

clear that one can hope, desire, doubt, or merely understand that P. In each case, we are able to distinguish between the state or attitude and that toward which it is directed.

The argument from intentionality may thus be put in the following way. If propositional attitudes have the aforementioned feature of directedness, then a proper understanding of them requires us to distinguish between a subject's attitude or mental state, on one hand, and that which the attitude is directed at, as is evidenced in the way we speak about belief, desire, etc. The best way to make sense of this distinction, and therefore to understand this aspect of propositional attitudes, is to posit mental states like belief, on one hand, and distinct things toward which the mental states are directed, propositions, on the other. Given the reasonable assumptions that there are such mental states, and that they really have this feature of directedness, the existence of propositions, construed as the *objective contents* of these mental states, or the *contents* of our propositional attitudes, can be inferred.

(One might wonder in what sense we are, simply on the basis of the argument from intentionality, compelled to infer that we are required to posit objective contents, when there are other entities seemingly well-suited to do the job—perhaps something like states of affairs, or facts, come to mind. After all, aren't our minds and consciousness directed, in the sorts of ways we've trying to capture here, at *the world*, i.e. the sorts of things and situations the sentences we express our beliefs are ostensibly *about*, rather than these strange, airy, and abstract intermediaries that propositions or contents are supposed to be? Without getting too mired in the ontology of states of affairs and what not, the problem seems to be that states of affairs themselves cannot, at least *prima facie*, play some of the more tricky semantical theoretical roles that we end up wanting out of



objective contents. For instance, there are situations in which we will want to be able to say –or at least I will– that two persons can have distinct beliefs despite the fact that they both believe of a particular thing *a* that it has a property *P*, or bears a relation *R*. Despite the fact that we would say they have the same attitude toward concerning the same fact or state of affairs, there are yet good reasons for saying that the contents of their beliefs are distinct. A classic example is Frege’s Hesperus-Phosphorus example, discussed below. As we will see, this is also at least a *prima facie* problem for theories of propositions which posit from propositions natures identical to or similar in structure to states of affairs, such as the Russellians. More on this below.)

It is important to keep in mind that neither this nor any other of the individual arguments we consider here strictly entails that propositions exist, if one assumes from the get-go that propositions have certain traditionally associated features, such as being the sorts of things that we mean to express or communicate by a large class of our utterances, being the referents of that- clauses, or being the fundamental bearers of truth-values; all that follows from the argument from intentionality (if anything at all), assuming it is a good one, is that there are objective contents, so construed, and that they are distinct from the mental states which are directed at them. But this is a key role that propositions, as traditionally understood, are supposed to play in theories of propositional attitudes, and it should be kept in mind that what we’re calling “proposition theory” seems to have developed as a way to give a unified account for (or “explain”) all of these varied phenomena. This is one among a group of diverse arguments, the totality of which, when taken together, is sometimes thought to amount to an intuitively compelling, attractive picture.

1.3.2. *The act/content distinction.* A very similar argument, which originates from analogous considerations in the philosophy of language, is to the effect that propositions must exist in order to account for the way we talk not only about the content of mental states but also that of our linguistic utterances. Suppose Mike expresses his abovementioned belief by actually uttering the sentence “Hand- rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory made ones.” We can and do analogously characterize this sort of act with sentences of the following form: “Mike said that P.” For linguistic utterances of this kind, there is an act/content distinction analogous to the state/content distinction discussed above. On one hand we have the act of linguistic utterance (further characterizable in terms of finer grained categories, e.g. assertion, conjecture, etc.), what Mike *did*, and on the other we have what we might say is that which Mike *expressed*, *said*, or *meant* in performing such an act, again characterizable in terms of a that- clause.

This notion of linguistic content is promiscuous in just the same way as the contents of our mental states. Whereas the same proposition can be the content of a subject’s distinct attitudes (one can believe, doubt, or hope that P),<sup>5</sup> the content of one’s assertion can just as easily be the content of one’s conjecture, denial, and so on. The contention that the same sorts of things which serve as the contents of many of our mental states or propositional attitudes, propositions, serve as the objective contents of our utterances, then, should come as no surprise. The idea that what Mike believes when he believes that hand- rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory made ones is identical to what Mike asserts when he asserts that hand rolled cigarettes... is quite intuitive; we characterize their contents with the same phrase, each of which is a that-

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<sup>5</sup> With the possible exception of so- called essentially indexical propositions noted. This should not, however, affect the investigation.

clause, in describing both his attitude and his utterance. This sort of phenomenon can be generalized, as whatever can be the content of one's belief can apparently be described as the content of what one has expressed in one's utterance, and vice versa. These sorts of considerations support the ideas that a) the sorts of things that serve as the contents of certain mental states are the sorts of things that serve as linguistic contents, and b) that if there are such things as propositions, their existence offers a promising way of accounting for or "explaining" our talk of linguistic and (some) mental content.<sup>6</sup>

*1.3.3. The logic of belief reports.* The argument from intentionality gets further support when we see that positing propositions is a satisfying way of making sense of the logic of belief reports. Again, the form of belief reports, such as Mike's belief about the relative harms of factory made cigarettes, seems to be relational; when we say something of the form "S believes that P," we seem to be expressing a two place relation, belief, that obtains between one thing, S, a person, and another, that P, what that person believes. A straightforward interpretation of this sort of sentence would lead us to believe that it has the following truth conditions: S believes that P is true iff the referent of "S," a person, stands in the belief relation to the referent of "that P". The intuitive way to account for the truth of such utterances, then, is to take the that- clause as a singular term referring to a proposition, the kind of object to which one's belief state can be directed (Schiffer 2003, 12-13).

According to Stephen Schiffer, taking that- clauses as genuinely referring singular terms best explains their behavior in what look to be valid inferences, such as the following:

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<sup>6</sup> I am, however, sympathetic to the claim that the contents of some mental states, such as that of having undirected anxiety, or that which is necessary for Mike's loving ale, etc., are not propositional in nature.

A believes that P, and so does B

So, There is something that A and B both believe (i.e. that P)

A believes everything that B says

B says that P

So, A believes that P (Schiffer 2003, 12)

These certainly appear to be valid inferences. Positing propositions as the referents of that- clauses in propositional attitude reports is an intuitive way to explain their validity.

*1.3.4. Linguistic communication.* Positing propositions as the contents of both our propositional attitudes and our linguistic utterances also appears to illuminate the phenomenon of linguistic communication (Moore 1953; Frege, 1892, 1919). For we can ask the question: In virtue of what can one person (A) understand another person's (B) utterance of a declarative sentence? Clearly, it is not merely the hearing of certain sounds issuing from B's mouth, since B could say something to A in a language that A doesn't understand, in which case B's attempt at communication could easily fail. In addition to hearing B's utterance, A would have to *understand* what B was saying with that utterance, and this is not necessarily accomplished simply by hearing the words spoken. We can understand B's uttering a sentence to A as an attempt to express some further thing, a proposition, and A's understanding (or lack thereof) what B said as requiring that he grasp the proposition expressed by B's utterance (Moore 1953, 57). Again, positing propositions specifically as the referents of that- clauses helps us understand this, since

we can characterize the thing that B was trying to communicate in virtue of his utterance, as well as what A understood by the utterance (if the act was successful), as something of the form “a” and “b” both refer to, or pick out the same object, and so each asserts an attribution of identity between the same two objects. But the statements a) and b) must differ in terms of epistemological status; a) is supposed to be knowable *a priori* whereas this is not always the case with b). This is evident given that it is possible that a subject know that a) is true without knowing that b) is true, despite the fact that ‘a’ and ‘b’ have the same referent.

In order to account for how a) and b) can differ with respect to epistemological status, Frege suggests that the two statements must differ in terms of *cognitive value*, or what a person who heard or read sentences of each form can infer, assuming that each is true. Given, as was argued above, that propositions are the contents of our utterances and the objects of belief, and that it is not irrational for a subject to believe a) while withholding from, or even disbelieving b), we can account for this fact by saying that a) expresses a distinct proposition than b). Frege’s reflections on the epistemological status and cognitive value of sentences lead us to the notion of a proposition.

*1.5. The mesh argument.* Positing propositions as the fundamental bearers of truth values, the contents of our linguistic utterances, and certain of our mental states seemingly has the potential to do a lot of work. Each of these considerations, as well as the arguments (being of the form discussed above) which can be constructed from them, offers a compelling reason for positing propositions. In sum, here is what, as traditionally conceived, positing propositions is supposed to do for us:

- 1) Provides us with an understanding of the possibility of identity of linguistic content
  - a) among distinct utterances, (similarity of meaning, content, act/content distinction)
  - b) among distinct sentences, (similarity of meaning, content)
  - c) among distinct sentences and utterances of distinct languages (translation practices)
- 2) Provides us with a theoretical account of the possibility of identity of mental content or cognitive value for distinct subjects or minds. This can account for our propositional attitude discourse and various sorts of inferences involving them.
- 3) 1 and 2 together provide us with a way of understanding the possibility of linguistic communication: An utterer U of a sentence S communicates something, P, to an audience A if in uttering U, S expresses a proposition, P, which is understood by A in virtue of hearing U's utterance of S.
- 4) Provides us with an account of the sorts of things which fundamentally have truth values, and among which logical relations hold.
- 5) Provides us with an account of what underpins our practice of assigning stable, consistent truth- bearers as logical relata: propositions are the sorts of things which our propositional variables range over.

But looking at all of these considerations has a further point, as I alluded to in the introduction of this section. What must be among the most important motivations for positing propositions, and for proposition theory in general, is that it has the capacity to account for all of the intuitions behind these arguments at the same time, in a unified and apparently simple way. (We might even say that the coherency of many of these

practices, and our ways of talking about various linguistic and mental phenomena, presupposes or commits us to something like proposition theory as it has been introduced.) We may find the intuitions and arguments individually plausible, but we might also worry whether any one of them constitutes all by itself, good reason for believing that there are such things, whatever they are. The apparent attractiveness of proposition theory, as it has been presented here, resides in the fact that it has such a wide base of independently plausible motivations and arguments; it promises to fulfill all of these theoretical desiderata, and validate so many of the key presuppositions to our theories and practices, in one fell swoop. But assuming that all this motivates us to take propositions seriously, we then have the responsibility of looking for a coherent ontological picture of them. If we have compelling reasons to posit them given the fact that they seem to fill so many theoretical gaps, then perhaps we have reasons for thinking these things exist –or so the explanatory model of understanding why we posit them would have us say. We turn now to see what kind of ontological picture we might inherit if we accept these considerations.

## **2. Considerations for an ontology of propositions.**

If the above arguments and considerations are good reasons for taking proposition theory seriously, they also give us, on the assumption that they are correct, a good indication of the sorts of things that propositions are (i.e. what their ontological status is). As traditionally conceived, propositions can be argued to have the following four ontological characteristics essentially:

1) They are are *abstract entities*.

- 2) They are *necessary*, or “*exist in every possible world.*”\* (with possible qualifications)
- 3) They are *mind-independent*.
- 4) They are *language-independent*.

This much is often assumed by many philosophers, both historical and contemporary, without much argument, and it might be thought to be obvious why this is, for each of the features enumerated above; in order to play the sorts of theoretical roles we have claimed for them on behalf of proposition theory, they apparently must possess these features. Below I try to reconstruct how one might think that proposition theory leads us to such an ontological picture, purely on the basis of the surveyed theoretical roles that propositions are supposed to play.

*2.1. Propositions as abstract.* If propositions exist, they are abstract entities, in the sense of ‘abstract’ that is traditionally opposed to “concrete;” they do not seem to be capable of possessing the sorts of properties that we think are essential to concrete objects, most importantly, a spatial location. They also, however, appear to lack the characteristics of having weight, size, shape, and do not seem capable of playing the sort of roles that paradigm physical objects do in causal explanations. Perhaps the most common sense of “abstract entity,” (or commonly, “abstracta”) is that something is an abstract entity if it lacks a spatial location (Thomasson 1999, 127). Here I will loosely follow this convention, while keeping in mind that propositions appear to lack more than just this.

The initial evidence for thinking that propositions are abstract comes from the absurdity of supposing any given proposition to possess such properties as being located, having mass, size, shape, and so on. If we were to ask, for instance, where the



proposition that snow is white is, or how big it is, or what it looks like, we would be likely to be met with incredulous stares. This is because such questions presuppose that these sorts of properties (location, size, being a possible object of visual sensation) are such that propositions can possess them. But the absurdity of supposing that spatial, size, or causal predicates can be applied to propositions shows the incoherency of this assumption, as is evidenced in the the kind of category mistakes, or grammatical nonsense, that results from attempting to so apply them. Propositions are simply not the sorts of things to which these sorts of predicates apply. Perhaps a more precise way of putting this, following Gilbert Ryle (1938, 181), is that propositions belong to a category of entity such that any application of location (et al) predicates (sentence or proposition factors) to them is essentially excluded, and this is shown in the kinds of linguistic and conceptual absurdities that result whenever we so attempt to (i.e. the absurdity of supposing that the proposition that snow is white has a determinate spatial location).

This, then, explains why propositions cannot be concrete. We get ourselves into grammatical nonsense when we suppose that predicates like location and size can be coherently applied to the referents of that clauses because the properties which correspond to these predicates are those which only concrete objects can have.

*2.2. Propositions as necessary.* Propositions are usually thought to be necessary, or necessarily existing entities. In common philosophical parlance, we spell out the notion of a thing or being's necessarily existing in terms of possible worlds; a thing exists necessarily if it exists in all possible worlds, where a possible world is a (total) way the world could be. Necessary beings are in this way distinguished from merely possible

beings, or those which exist in some but not all possible worlds, and contingent beings, which exist in the actual world (and are thus possible), but not in every possible world.

One reason offered for thinking of propositions as necessary existents should be reasonably clear when we consider their role as logical relata. We noted above that in order for propositions to be the sorts of things which most fundamentally contradict, are consistent with, and entail each other, they must be the sorts of things which can be true or false, i.e. they must be truth-bearers. One way of understanding this feature of propositions is to say that in order for them to be the sorts of things that are true or false, they must have something like a truth-condition, or something about them which specifies the conditions under which they are true. For instance, the following might spell out the truth condition for the above mentioned proposition that Mike was said to believe:

That hand-rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory made ones is true *iff* hand-rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory made ones.

Recent discussions of the nature of propositions have made clear that propositions have their truth-conditions essentially (Schiffer 2003, 14). That propositions have their truth-conditions essentially follows from the fact that any instantiation of the general schema utilized above (That  $p$  *iff*  $p$ ) would appear to be a necessary truth; each proposition specifies its truth condition, and can thus be true or false, in every possible world.

Certainly this is the case, for it is true that trees on Earth are nourished by sunlight and water, and this is true of some other possible worlds, false of others. In other words, we

can see that the truth- condition specified by a proposition is essential to what it is, and that for any given proposition, were it to have a distinct truth- condition, it would be a distinct proposition. This is accounted for by the fact that all instances of “That  $p$  *iff*  $p$ ” are necessary truths, for this allows us to identify and distinguish propositions across possible worlds.

The foregoing is sometimes presented as a sufficient reason to assert the necessary existence of propositions (Schiffer 1996, 160). So the argument goes, in order for the above equivalence (That hand- rolled ... *iff* hand- rolled ...) to be a necessary truth, the proposition that hand rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory made ones must have that truth- condition in every possible world. But in order for a proposition to have a truth- condition (and thus be capable of being true or false) in a world, or possible state of affairs, it must exist in that possible world. Propositions must therefore exist in every possible world.

Whether or not this is the orthodox argument for the necessary existence of propositions, its soundness is less than fully clear. The principle used as an assumption in the argument as I interpret it –that for any given entity  $e$ , if  $e$  necessarily has a certain feature, and hence would have that feature in any possible world, that  $e$  must therefore exist in every possible world– is at least suspect when we get more specific in some cases. We would not, for instance, want to say that because Dave Matthews is necessarily born of certain parents, that he exists in every possible world; what follows

for humans or persons or mammals (whichever sortal we construe Dave Matthews under) would simply be that in order for anything to be Dave Matthews, it would have to have those parents, but not that he exists in every possible world.<sup>7</sup>

In order to make the argument work on behalf of propositions we would have to provide a reason for thinking that the principle does have the assumed implications where *e* is a proposition, which might involve pointing to some possibly relevant differences between the concept of a human and that of a proposition (e.g. I can certainly conceptualize a total state of affairs without Dave Matthews or human beings or mammals, but just try to conceptualize a world without propositions –how exactly are you differently conceptualizing the world? If and when you have an answer to that one, ask yourself the following: would it be a world in which it was true *that there were no propositions?* I can't imagine how one would begin to conceptualize such a world, or its opposite, for that matter.)

Sympathetic as I am to that strategy, there seems to be a somewhat clearer and more direct way (though not unrelated to the above) of demonstrating the necessary existence of propositions, a way that originates from another feature of propositions (or our linguistic practices involving them), i.e. their being absolutely ontologically independent of the empirical facts. It is, as we have seen, an essential feature of propositions that they have truth-conditions, and hence can be true or false (maybe there are other things for them to be between these –though for the moment,<sup>8</sup> let's simplify).

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Amie Thomasson for pointing out this and for suggesting the alternative strategy that follows it below.

<sup>8</sup> That this complication makes no difference can be seen as follows: Let's suppose that propositions can be true, false, or indeterminate –it is irrelevant whether this is a third value or simply the absence of value. Then it would simply be the case that, for any given proposition, it was true, false, or indeterminate even if there was no snow or white things.

But it would be true of any given proposition, say, the proposition that snow is white, that it would be true or false even if there were no snow, or no white things, or snow wasn't in fact white.... No matter how the empirical facts might vary, from time to time, place to place, and even world to world, it would still be true of that proposition that would be either true or false –that fact, of course, might be related to the empirical facts, but the fact that it exists is not. Hence, the conditions required for the existence of the proposition (if there be such conditions), indeed any given proposition, must be fulfilled regardless of the empirical facts. Hence the proposition exists regardless of empirical fact. This then is another way to the necessity of propositions, since if they exist regardless of the empirical facts, and the empirical facts are all that change from possible world to possible world, then it follows that they also exist in every possible world –the fact that they exist also would not change from world to world.<sup>9</sup>

If we step back for a second, though, there may still be some worries about the whether even the last argument has enough force to merit the conclusion that all propositions, including singular as well as general propositions, exist in all possible worlds. Consider, for instance, the proposition that Mike's defense went reasonably well. It's quite reasonable to think that this is the sort of proposition which exists only if Mike does, if for no other reason than that worlds in which Mike does not exist, he could not be referred to. And, of course, if Mike could not be referred to, it seems clear that no proposition, even a proposition expressed by using the very same speech act type, would be precisely the one which has the content that this one has when we express it in our world. As this seems pretty clearly to be the case, it would appear that some

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<sup>9</sup> Again, excluding the possibility of singular and object-dependent propositions.

propositions, perhaps all singular propositions, are object-dependent, i.e. they depend for their existence upon the individuals picked out by the singular referential terms in the speech acts used to express them. And since, at least for many, many singular propositions –including most of those we express in ordinary speech, the objects we refer to –persons, cats, nations, cities, and so on, are contingently existing things, it follows that a great many of the propositions we express are not necessary existents, but contingent. Given this, in what follows, I will restrict my attention primarily to the ontological features and status of general propositions. The arguments concerning and account of propositions, their ontological and epistemological status, as well as their explanatory value (or lack thereof) given in the following chapters should be taken to be limited (mostly) to general propositions, even when not explicitly so limited.

*2.3. Propositions as mind and language- independent.* Propositions are traditionally held to be mind and language- independent in the sense that to assert the existence of any given proposition, or that propositions exist generally, one does not thereby commit oneself to anything like the existence of minds or languages (Carnap 1956, 16). It also appears that propositions must be the sorts of things which exist whether or not they are believed or entertained at all (Bolzano 1837, 35), for it does not seem that propositions are in any sense created by, or in any way dependent upon having been entertained by anyone or anything. Similarly, propositions need not be expressed in a language, or even be expressible in any given language to exist; they appear rather to be the sorts of things that are discovered rather than created, and this clearly follows from the conviction that there are propositions for which we do not have the current linguistic means to express,

or to express clearly for that matter.

That propositions are mind and language- independent in this way can again be seen as a consequence of their independence from empirical facts. Assuming for the moment that propositions have existence conditions (conditions under which a given entity exists) at all, their existence cannot be in any way dependent upon anything merely possible or contingent. But surely there are possible worlds in which there are no minds or languages; the existence of beings with minds and which have languages is not necessary. Thus, the existence of propositions cannot in any way depend on the existence of minds or languages.

Propositions are often asserted to be language- independent in way that is importantly distinct from the above kind of ontological or existential independence, which follows from their role as the sorts of things we believe and express through our linguistic utterances. In particular, we've seen that construing propositions as mental and linguistic contents allows us to make sense of the conviction that two monolingual speakers of distinct languages can each believe the same proposition, and express their belief in one and the same proposition by asserting it, each in his native language. What this means is that propositions are independent of any particular language, since the proposition, for instance, that snow is white, can be expressed and understood in any natural language; propositions are thus language- independent in that no proposition is tied (in principle) to being expressed in any one particular language.

That propositions have the ontological features traditionally associated with them: being abstract, being necessary existents, and being mind and language- independent, all appear to have clear, principled basis in the theoretical roles assigned to them by

traditional proposition theory. But propositions theory so understood, along with other theories positing entities with similar ontological features have been heavily criticized and rejected by philosophers for various reasons, which we will need to examine. From here we will get acquainted with and evaluate some of the more vexing problems associated with proposition theory, in order to get a better grip on its overall viability, and to see how this rather generic picture fares compared to some of the more developed theories about the nature of propositions we'll consider at the end of the chapter, each of which builds upon or departs from this basic "core" in some interesting ways.

### **3. Problems with the traditional ontology of propositions.**

As we saw above, positing propositions seems to do a lot of work for us in the philosophy of mind, language, and logic. But proposition theory is often met with a skeptical or even dismissive attitude by those wary of ontological bloating, and by those who find certain kinds of abstracta strange and obscure. Below are some vague but familiar worries about the ontology of propositions generally, as we've come to it above. Each initiates an important challenge to the proposition theorist.

*3.1. The epistemological status of propositions.* Propositions, *qua* abstract, necessarily existing entities, are not part of the world in the way that more familiar objects such as ordinary middle-sized objects are. But what's the problem with that? Ultimately, it seems that a legitimate worry, or at least a sense of puzzlement about propositions, is rooted in the fact that unlike trees, mountains, cars and human beings, they are not empirical posits. For although there are serious, and some would argue, intractable



problems about the nature of things like natural objects, artifacts, and human beings, many who might be willing to admit the existence of such things will want to deny the existence of propositions, perhaps because, unlike mountains and trees, there appears to be no evidential base in experience for admitting them. If they are not in any way empirical posits, then how could we come to know that they exist, or know what they are like? Even if we could somehow infer their existence and essential features from otherwise reliable but nonempirical assumptions, how could we ever confirm that these inferences are correct? This sort of worry is exacerbated by the observation, easily gleaned from our investigation to this point, that we seem to have no reason for positing propositions other than as the sorts of entities which are supposed to “account for” or “explain” various of our practices. Simply put, there is no theory-independent reason, aside from what we can seemingly infer from their role as explanatory entities, for thinking that propositions exist.

*3.2. Propositions as explanatory entities: objections.* Another related group of worries concerns the role of propositions as a kind of explanatory entity. As we saw above, the main reasons we have for admitting propositions into our ontology are arguments that trade primarily on the supposed explanatory power of positing propositions, or any theory which does so; we are to believe that there are propositions ultimately on the basis that their existence explains some important and otherwise puzzling phenomena. But how are propositions, qua abstract, necessarily existing entities, supposed to explain anything? For it appears that our ordinary, everyday notion of explanation is causal in nature, and the notion of explanation employed in the physical sciences also appears to be of

this kind. It is, however, very difficult to see how something purely abstract can play a role in any sort of causal explanation, and one may wonder whether there is any other legitimate notion of explanation to be had, or at least one that is not trivial. A comprehensive accounting of this and the other so-called explanatory problems that follow below will have to wait until chapter four, where we will take the issue head-on.

*3.2.1. Dormitive Virtue?* Dormitive virtue explanations are really only pseudo-explanations –at best cleverly worded restatements of the facts to be explained. This is precisely the problem with the explanation that poppies put people to sleep because they have the dormitive virtue, i.e. the power to put people to sleep. It might seem like we're doing no more than this with the notion of a proposition in the above sorts of explanatory arguments: two people, such as Pete and Pierre, can have the same belief in virtue of having a belief relation to the same proposition. But, if, as we've argued, propositions are just the sorts of things people can have belief- relations towards, nothing whatsoever has been explained. If this is the only sort of explanation that a proposition theorist can muster up, we might begin to wonder not only whether it could be genuinely explanatory (whatever that means!), but also whether such a theory could in any other way be in the least bit interesting, or merit out attention.

*3.3. Propositions as hypostatizations.* Yet another troubling feature of proposition theory, as Schiffer (1996, 153) has pointed out, is the fact that we seem to get committed to propositions by merely reifying, or hypostatizing them into existence as the referents of that- clauses. For it appears to be nothing other than our apparently referential use of that- clauses that commits us to the existence of propositions. But why should grammar

be a justifiable guide to what exists, especially given some of the strange sorts of ontological and epistemological results we get when using it to derive the claim that there are (among other things) propositions? Also, as we saw, it is our use of that- clauses in these sorts of explanations which is supposed to reveal the nature of the things they refer to –this seems the sole basis from which we can infer what the basic ontological features of propositions are. To restate an above worry, our use is merely grounded in the desiderata of proposition theory, and appears to have no theory- independent evidential basis. Interpreting our use of that- clauses in a realistic vein, as genuinely referring to independently existing entities, then warrants the charge that we are guilty of taking our reifying talk too seriously. It is as though we admit propositions into our ontology only because we've invented, or perhaps inherited, a name for that kind of thing. Granted, proposition talk, and our hypostatizing use of that- clauses, gives us a convenient and useful way of speaking about various phenomena and organizing theoretical information; but is this really a good reason, that we can so usefully talk, for thinking that something such as propositions exist?

3.4. “*Heavy-duty*” *Platonism*. Another set of worries about propositions builds on the hypostatization and epistemological concerns. Schiffer nicely approximates this worry in the following passage:

It may seem that ... we're liable to be stuck with what might be called *heavy-duty Platonism*. Propositions and properties actually exist; the singular terms that appear to refer to them really do refer to them. Moreover, these entities are as ontologically and conceptually independent of us as rocks, dinosaurs, trees, electrons, or people. In *no sense* are properties and propositions products of our linguistic or conceptual practices. Consequently, in no sense can we study and learn the nature of these things simply by observing how we're inclined to talk about them. Consequently, properties and propositions are as much in the world as potential objects of *discovery* as island or quarks. (1996, 153)

As I will argue below, something like this picture seems to have a kind of default status among most traditional proposition ontologists, and seems implicit among some of the well-known proposition ontologies. There are at least two distinct kinds of Platonism suggested by the above passage:

**Platonism 1:** A theory positing a given sort of entity (such as propositions) is Platonist in one sense if it holds that these entities are abstract, non-causal, and such that their existence (that they are) and natures (what they are) are wholly independent of mind in language in the following sense:

**P1)** Nothing we do or could say or think actually does or could in any way or bring such entities into existence, or make it the case that they exist.

The obvious contrast here to the independence of empirical posits like rocks and electrons would be mind- or language- dependent things like promises and doubts; the former are brought into existence by saying certain words, and are thus language dependent, whereas the latter are brought into existence by having certain thoughts, and are thus mind-dependent. Examining this assumption will in chapter two turn out to be quite instructive.

**Platonism 2:** A theory of this kind is Platonist in another sense if it holds that the abstracta it posits are in the following way *epistemologically* mind- and language-independent:

**P2)** In order to discover the nature of such entities, some sort of substantially non-linguistic and non-conceptual investigation of the world is required, i.e. the natures, or at least what is essential to the natures of such entities could not simply be read off our linguistic or conceptual practices.

Again, the most obvious contrast is between empirical posits like rocks and electrons, for which we must undertake substantial empirical investigation of the world to find out about, and linguistic or conceptual posits like promises and doubts, which we can “discover”, or at least know about simply by armchair reflection on our concepts or their application through language.

A third principle, not explicitly suggested in the above quote, but one it will make sense to articulate as at least related to theses P1 and P2, is the following:

**P3)** In order to discover that such entities exist, some sort of substantially non-linguistic and non-conceptual investigation of the world is required.

“Heavy-duty” Platonism about propositions in Schiffer’s sense would explicitly involve both P1 and P2, though I think that P3 is a natural aspect of the ontological picture represented by P1 and P2 and Schiffer’s quote. It would be strange indeed if we could somehow discover the nature of something only by substantially non-linguistic or conceptual investigation of the world and yet have it be the case that we nonetheless may discover that entities independent in these ways exist simply by armchair reflection –I can think of nothing that could possibly fit that bill.<sup>10</sup> Even promises and doubts are such that our knowing they exist requires investigation that can in some sense be described as empirical, and language-independent; knowing that there is a promise requires observing someone performing a certain speech act, or at least the report or recording of one, and knowing that there is a doubt, even in oneself, requires something like the reflective experience of a certain kind of thought or attitude. In this sense, even entities roughly

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<sup>10</sup> I suppose some monotheists might say that their deity is an example, on the assumptions that the nature of the deity is revealed through canonical scriptural traditions, that those scriptural traditions do not themselves provide enough evidence to justify belief in such a deity, but that some version of the ontological (or some other a priori) argument is sound. In that case, the primary way to discover the nature of the deity would be empirical but knowledge or discovery of the deity would be purely a priori.

described as linguistic or mind- dependent line up with rocks and electrons epistemologically.

So then, what problems will we encounter with this sort of view about propositions? If nothing else, theses P2 and P3 exacerbate the epistemological worries we encountered above with the assumption that propositions are non- causal abstracta. Non- causal abstracta can't be experienced nor can we imagine what would count as experiential data for discovering the nature and existence of such entities. Given this, one might begin to wonder what could possibly count as the non- linguistic aspect of what the Platonist requires for a genuine investigation of propositions, and thus how a Platonist could have a legitimate epistemology of them. And again, we might worry that a referential-cum-existential line on propositions is merely the result of our hypostatizing our linguistic practices of using that- clauses referentially, or worse yet, a hypostatizational projection of the illusory need for some illusory theoretical or explanatory desiderata onto those practices.

These, I think, typify the sorts of worries that are usually, and, I think, legitimately expressed concerning proposition theory as we've seen it so far. Anyone who wishes to defend a genuine existential-cum-referential stance to propositions should have to answer them, as they represent a compelling set of prima facie problems for any genuine ontology of propositions. This seems to hold for all of the different incarnations of proposition theory, surveyed in the following section.

#### **4. Conventional Proposition Ontologies.**

4.1. *What's wrong with the core as it is, anyway?* Many convinced by the basic arguments for propositions reviewed above, and certainly those that are at least sympathetic to propositions, are likely to find the “core,” i.e. the theoretical center of proposition theory, articulated in the first two sections of this chapter, reasonable as far as it goes, but may rest uneasy until they have certain further ontological questions answered about the “nature” of propositions. I can imagine that many a philosopher wonders what, exactly, propositions are, and is unsatisfied with what we came to in section 2 above (especially given the problems encountered in section 3). One might wonder how they fit into a more general ontology, what their relation is to other philosopher’s entities, as well as those of daily life, and so on.

First, there seems to be something like the following vague but apparently coherent question about their natures: What are propositions *like*, and what is it *about them* that allows them to play the theoretical roles they are supposed to play? This sort of question might be motivated by the thought that it simply can’t just be the case that propositions play the theoretical roles they do *sui generis*—there must be something further about them in virtue of which they perform their appointed duties. Such philosophers might not be satisfied they have an acceptable ontological picture of propositions until they have answers to these and like questions.

The following is a brief summary of the three mainstream options open to theorists who are sympathetic to proposition theory but require more in structure and detail than what is offered by the core alone. At least two of these options, Russellian theory and possible worlds theory, could be construed as providing strategies for answering the sorts of questions that arose in the previous paragraph. Each of the

following theories uniquely builds upon, interprets, and occasionally departs from the core, and each can be distinguished from both the core and the others on several dimensions. These dimensions include what specifically motivates the theory (aside from playing the definitional theoretical roles we've discussed, which unites them), what the theory is thought to commit us to in terms of what exists, as well as the specific problems that might be raised to the theories individually. This is no place for a thorough overview, so for brevity's sake, we will focus on the ontologically minded issues, while mentioning a few of the semantic problems each theory encounters.

*4.2. Fregean Theory.* Frege's initial motivations in drawing a sense/reference distinction, as we noted above, were to account for the difference in epistemological status and cognitive content between identity statements of different forms. We saw earlier that this distinction leads to an argument for the existence of propositions, one that can be cast in the general argument pattern made note of at 1.1. Frege's account of propositions endorses almost all of the theoretical roles attributed to propositions, and the ontological picture he draws is explicitly in agreement with the core picture in positing an ontology of abstract, necessary, mind- and language- independent propositions. Frege is no doubt, along with Bolzano, a principal author of what we've been calling the traditional "core" of proposition theory, but what we need to do at present is see what else a Fregean ontology of propositions entails besides the core.

Fregean propositional ontology can be seen as resulting from a commitment to a sense/reference distinction, both at the level of whole sentences and individual words, and to Frege's commitment to a compositional semantics. A basic principle of Frege's



compositional semantics is that the senses of complex expressions, such as whole sentences, are determined by the senses of the individual expressions (words) that make them up, plus the ways in which they are strung together (word order, grammar, etc.), plus context (identity and intentions of the speaker, time, location, and perhaps others). Since Fregean propositions are just the senses of whole declarative sentences, this means that each proposition is essentially composed of the senses of the individual words that make up the sentence or sentences conventionally used to express it, as well as the date, time, location of utterance and identity of the speaker (or thinker). Fregean propositions are thus something like ordered sets of simple senses, dates, locations, speakers, and perhaps grammatical rules and other contextual factors –if ordered sets do not by themselves do enough to capture all that is meant by “the way in which they (words) are strung together,” and if other contextual factors are required to individuate the proposition. Since sets will turn out to be a component of each of the differing ontologies we will consider in this section, we will not focus on any of the traditional objections to sets. Beyond that, then, what Fregean propositions commit us to, at the very least, is the existence of individual times, locations, speakers or thinkers, and senses for simple expressions. It is the notion of sense that is most distinctive aspect of the Fregean theory and at the same time, the root of the most serious ontological worries about Fregean propositions.

Unlike the Russellian and possible world conceptions of propositions we will discuss below, Fregeanism is not, by itself, an attempt to *reduce* the notion of a proposition to other, more favored notions. Its main distinction from the core is to make propositions constructions out of senses, and hence posit a complexity of structure to

propositions. However, ontologically speaking, senses do not look much better or worse (or different, really) at the atomic or simple level (word- senses) than they do at the complex level (whole declarative senses). If word- senses are to compose mind- and language- independent, necessary abstracta, they must have these same features, and so share the same problems just discussed in sections 3.1 – 3.4. We cannot avoid these objections by claiming that word- senses are abstractions from the senses of whole sentences; however plausible it may be to locate the more fundamental unit of sense at the level of what can be communicated, stated, or evaluated for truth and falsity, one fares no better ontologically by doing so. On the other hand, there don't appear to be any ontologically- minded objections that are specific to simple senses that would lead one to prefer complex senses to them. The principal ontological worry for Fregean theory, then, lies in an apparent inability to say much more than we already have about what, exactly, these things we've called "senses" are, how they do what they're supposed to do, and how we could come to know of and about them; this is thought to embarrass the Fregean (Schiffer 2003, 24). Fregean theory then seems to me to be the metaphorical poster-child for heavy-duty Platonism about propositions.

*4.3. Russellian Theory.* Some recent theorists of language, including Scott Soames and Nathan Salmon, have sought an alternative to what was once perceived as the Fregean orthodoxy on the nature of propositions. The alternative they have produced draws heavy inspiration from views Bertrand Russell held about the nature of propositions, and is motivated largely by a commitment to direct reference theory in the philosophy of language. Propositions, according to Russellians, play all or most of the theoretical roles

assigned to them in section 1 above. They also share other key features with Fregean propositions, such as being compositionally determined, contextually determined, and being complex and structured in the sense that they are composed of other (non-propositional) entities. Beyond these similarities Russellians part ways with the Fregean tradition of identifying propositions as complex senses, rejecting the sense/reference distinction and the existence of word- and sentence- senses altogether.

Russellians instead hold that propositions are something like sets of individuals and attributes, or properties. For instance, the sentence “Socrates is wise” expresses a proposition, namely that Socrates is wise, in virtue of picking out an individual, Socrates, directly (without the intermediary of any sense), and a property, wisdom, which is expressed by the predicate expression “is wise.” Russellian propositions are thus sometimes said just to be the combinations of individuals, attributes and contexts (including, as above, date, location, and speaker of utterance), though in keeping with the generally acknowledged point that propositions must be abstract entities (Salmon 1986, 25), it is best to interpret Russellians as positing propositions as compositionally determined ordered *sets of* things like Socrates, wisdom, and contextual factors. They can thus agree with the “core” picture in saying that propositions have all of the ontological features claimed of them in section 2 above, and thus appear to inherit the same basic problems discussed in section 3 above

From a certain ontological perspective, Russellians might be seen to hold a reductionistic advantage over the Fregeans; whereas the Fregean posits the existence of propositions over and above linguistic entities and the sorts of things they refer to or have other fairly well- acknowledged semantic relations to (individuals and properties),

Russellians make due without any extras, as propositions are nothing over and above the (ordered sets of) individuals and properties they are about.

Although they may not always be motivated directly by these sorts of considerations, Russellians might claim as a further ontological virtue of their account that it is, on balance, simpler and more elegant for positing fewer kinds of entities, on balance than the Fregean. They do this, however, at the expense of apparently not being able to account for apparent differences in cognitive value, and are thus led to deny that there really is any difference of that kind in the case we saw Frege dealing with and any of a similar sort. This is widely thought to be a serious problem for Russellians.

Yet another advantage Russellian theory might be thought to have the over Fregean theory is that of having a ready answer to the sorts of questions about the nature of propositions that seem to require that we go beyond their core theoretical roles and fit them into a more general ontology. In contrast, to the Fregean, who offers us a new sort of entity in senses, about which we seem to be able to conclude very little beyond what is determined by its theoretical roles, the Russellian can tell us that his propositions are sets of individuals and properties –about which he will no doubt claim we already know a great deal. He thus has the potential to answer apparently coherent questions about how propositions can play the roles they apparently do, and place them in a more general, developed ontology. It goes without saying, however, that the ontological and epistemological problems that plague properties and sets (on the generous assumption that we grant individuals as epistemologically, if not ontologically, uncontroversial, for the time being) will plague the Russellian, and that these are in many ways similar to those we brought up as problematic to generic proposition theory in section 3. In

addition, we might wonder how the Russellian could claim to *know*, short of some a priori argument that propositions are *not sui generis abstracta*, that the nature of propositions *does* in fact extend beyond what we can infer from their assigned theoretical roles. But even given that, we might still wonder, in a Platonist frame of mind, how the Russellian could claim to know that they've got the extended nature of propositions right, especially when, as we'll see below, there is, in addition to the Fregean and Russellian, another, quite different extended (in the above sense –going beyond what we can conclude on the basis of their core theoretical roles) ontology of propositions.

*4.4. Possible Worlds Theory.* Another, very different view on the ontological nature of propositions, introduced by Robert Stalnaker (1964), and developed in different ways by both Stalnaker (1984) and David Lewis (1973), has its roots in the intension/extension distinction in formal semantics and is largely motivated by a pragmatic thesis about the nature of propositional attitudes.

First, the distinction between the extension and intension of an expression can be accounted for in terms of possible worlds. The *extension* of an expression is what is *denoted* in a world, and is thus an individual (singular terms), a class (predicates), or a truth value (declarative sentences). The *intension* of an expression is *the rule by which the extension is determined*, i.e. a *function from possible worlds* to individuals, classes, or truth-values. Given that we can plausibly identify propositions as the intensions of whole declarative sentences, a proposition is thus a function from possible worlds to truth-values, or alternatively, the set of all possible worlds in which that sentence is true.

Second, the identification of propositions with sets of possible worlds is supposed to explain an independently plausible thesis about the relation between propositional attitudes and action, namely, that they are functional states of a rational agent. For our purposes, a state is functional if it is individuated in terms of its role in determining behavior. The idea, then, is that on this theory, to explain why an agent did something, we show that by doing it s/he could satisfy his/her desires in a world where his/her beliefs are true. The explanation- sketch looks something like the following: a rational agent deliberates by considering various possible alternative futures, where s/he knows that which alternative becomes actual depends in part on his/her choice of action. Desire functions to sort those alternatives into those to be sought and those to be avoided, whereas belief functions to determine which are the relevant alternatives. If we spell out the notion of alternative futures in terms of possible worlds, we will have an account of the relation between propositional attitudes and action that can be explained by the possible worlds account of propositions (Stalnaker 1964, 81).

Like both of the above accounts, this account conforms to the core in terms of the ontological constraints on propositions, and thus inherits the same ontological problems we discussed about the core in section 3. Like the Russellian account, the possible worlds account seems to posit propositions that can play all the theoretical roles assigned by the intuitive core of proposition theory, but pays no mind to the Fregean sense/reference distinction; it thus suffers the same counterintuitiveness we noted above in the Russellian rejection of sense. Further semantic problems are thought to plague the possible worlds view as a result of the sorts of identity conditions propositions have on the account –as it has the consequence that there is only one necessary truth.

The possible worlds view also might claim an ontological advantage over the Fregean view in that propositions are supposed to be capable of complete ontological reduction in terms of other entities for which they might want to claim there already exists a clear, or at least clearer, understanding than senses or properties. Possible worlds theorist can therefore claim a rival status to the Russellians in terms of being a theory of the extended (i.e. beyond what we can infer on the basis of their theoretical roles) nature of propositions, having for us an answer to further questions about their natures, about how they, in virtue of their natures, play the theoretical roles they do, and about how they fall into a more general and developed ontology –one that includes sets and possible worlds. Whether this reduction is, on balance, in any sense more plausible, economical, etc., than that of the Russellian will no doubt be a matter of controversy, and one we've no right to expect settlement over it here. Suffice it to say that in payment for the readiness to answer such questions, possible worlds theorists will, like the Russellians, have to answer the same sorts of questions about how they can claim to know that the natures of propositions extend beyond what is determined by their theoretical roles in the alleged ways. Questions similar to those we raised about the ontological and epistemological status of propositions, and perhaps others besides, seem to arise for an ontology of possible worlds (and depending how you construe them, incredulous stares). Finally, there is the creeping worry about whether the sense in which these sorts of propositions are posited to “explain” that propositional attitudes are functional states of rational agents is really anything other than dormitive virtue explanation.

As we can see, many of the worries that plague the generic theory of propositions also plague the more developed, reductionist ontologies of propositions that are offered to

us in the contemporary literature. The most pressing among them are the explanatory and epistemological worries discussed in section 3. As we've seen, the rhetoric of a minimalist or "pleonastic" account of propositions might be aimed disarming some these worries –most obviously providing us with ways of avoiding the potential epistemological and otherwise Platonist problems mentioned above, by "deflating" the ontological issues concerning them –Schiffer is clearly hoping for an "existence affirming alternative to heavy- duty Platonism" (1996, 153). Whether a minimalist approach can deliver the goods will be our principal subject in the chapters that follow.

From here, we will begin to consider whether and how a minimalist can deliver on some of the more interesting deflationary claims about their natures, both ontologically and epistemologically. In the next chapter we take up the issue of ontological dependence, and whether propositions could, on a minimalist account, be argued to be ontologically mind or language dependent, as is suggested by claims that they are "language- created," "shadows of sentences," or exist "as a result of a manner of speaking" (Schiffer 1996, 153) and the like.



## **Chapter 2: Propositions and Ontological Dependence**

The thesis under investigation in this dissertation is that general propositions, the contents of belief and various other attitudes, the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity, and the objects of logical relations, can be successfully assimilated into a minimalist ontology, perhaps by analysing the notion of a proposition in what we might call a deflationary way. The aim of this chapter is to explore and evaluate possible reasons for thinking this by way of investigating the thesis that propositions are, contrary to what is generally presupposed, mind- and/or language- dependent in some significant way. The relevance for this sort of investigation should be clear; propositions are generally assumed to be ontologically independent of the practices and natures of human beings in a variety of significant ways, and it is taken to be a fairly significant fact about their nature and ontological status, giving them the air of being, in some sense, part of the theoretical furniture of the world, indeed, of every possible world. As we will see, recent work in minimalist and deflationary ontology (Schiffer 1994, 1996; Thomasson 2001) sometimes appears to suggest that there may be an important connection between having a mind- or language- dependent status and having a deflationary ontological status. Indeed, one intuitive sense of ‘minimal’ just seems to be that a theory of the nature of something (an entity, kind, a concept, etc.) counts as minimalist if the theory says that that thing, or some aspect of it, is in some way dependent upon or determined by beings such as ourselves, in virtue of our linguistic or conceptual practices, perhaps even exclusively so.

So what, then, is minimalism, what would minimalism about propositions be, and how might it seem to suggest that propositions are in some way mind or language

dependent? In the chapter following this one, we will very thoroughly examine at least one set of “minimalist” claims about the nature of propositions, but we should here at least get some of the flavor of what a minimalist perspective on propositions might look like, and how it might seem to suggest that propositions are mind- dependent.

In his recent work on a “pleonastic” ontology of propositions, Stephen Schiffer has advanced a number of claims which might seem to suggest theses of ontological dependence between propositions and people, or, more accurately, what he calls our conceptual and linguistic practices (i.e. our practices of using certain sorts of terms to talk, and certain sorts of concepts to think). Among these claims are the theses that propositions (among other historically troublesome abstracta) have their natures determined by our linguistic practices, i.e. by our ordinary or conventional ways of using purportedly referential singular terms for them (2003, 59-60, 63), and that the nature of propositions, all there is to know about them (qua propositions), can be discovered by reflecting on the practices in question (2003, 60). The idea that the nature of some entity or kind of entity is in some way *determined* by the way we talk or think can certainly suggest that it is dependent upon those practices as well; in discussions of supervenience (Kim 1989, 544) questions of determination and dependence are sometimes assumed to be one and the same, and the idea that an entity is dependent upon what determines it has an intuitive ring. Such theses would also not be without intuitive precedents, as other sorts of abstracta, including speech act types such as that of promising and literary entities such as fictional characters, have been claimed to be dependent upon us, and alongside this claim is usually some variant of the claim that they have their natures determined by our practices. (Thomasson 2003). And finally, Schiffer’s

abovementioned claims about the relationship between our practices and propositions are sometimes coupled with suggestive statements such as that propositions are “hypostatizations of our ways of talking about them” (1996, 153), and that they “exist as a result of a manner of speaking” (in reference to certain linguistic transformations which are supposed to commit us to their existence, called by Schiffer ‘pleonastic’, 1996, 153).<sup>11</sup> Also operating in the background of such discussions is Mark Johnston’s claim that we are seemingly committed to the existence of propositions as a result of what he calls “reifying talk” (1988, 36).<sup>12</sup>

But aside from the fact that there seems to have been some basis in the literature for looking into the possible mind or language dependence of propositions, we’ll see that more compelling reasons can be given to motivate this. For the fact that propositions function essentially in our ontology (or at least that of the propositionalist) as the sorts of things that have truth values suggests what appears to be a potent strategy for an argument that they are, at the very least, mind- dependent. For being truth- bearers is a specific instance of the more general feature of being assessible for accuracy, which is sometimes said to be an irreducibly intentional notion. According to at least one recent and influential theorist (Searle 1999, 21) intentionality is the sort of thing that can only be had by an object in virtue of being related to a mind or minds in what appears to be a variant of an ontological dependence relation. This would at appear to suggest an intuitive strategy of drawing a dependence link between propositions and minds. We will spend a good deal of the chapter drawing out and evaluating this sort of strategy.

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<sup>11</sup> Also quite suggestive is the title of Schiffer’s 1996 article “Language- Created Language- Independent Entities,” from which these passages are taken.

<sup>12</sup> In most, if not all, of Schiffer’s work cited above Schiffer at least mentions Johnston’s work on propositions, and often he is cited as a key influence to Schiffer’s development of the ‘pleonastic’ view.

However, before we can attempt evaluate the prospects of any such strategy, a lot needs to be sorted out about the nature and kind(s) of significant forms of dependence. There are several importantly different ways of claiming that one thing is dependent upon another, and as we will see, a lot hangs on what sort of construal is given to an ontological dependence claim.

From a consideration of various kinds of dependence relations we will move to an examination of three crucial features of propositions which might be thought to make them dependent upon mind or language: their being truth- evaluable, which might be thought to make propositions mind- dependent, their being the objects of propositional attitudes, and their being expressible in a public language, which might be argued to make them language- dependent. Also of interest to us will be some of Schiffer's more suggestive remarks, mentioned above. The most important of these will be the idea that the nature of propositions is, in some sense, determined by the ways in which we use language and concepts (a thesis we will later come to call the *Determination Thesis*, henceforth abbreviated "DT," which is perhaps the most central idea in Schiffer's "pleonastic" theory). For while a full investigation into the meaning, significance, and possible truth of these claims will have to wait until the following chapter, we should be able to determine their relation to and significance for issues of ontological dependence and propositions.

The reader should know beforehand that despite the length and depth of what follows, I will, for the most part, argue that there is and can be no ontologically significant relation of dependence obtaining between propositions and mind or language. After an investigation into the most relevant seeming conceptions of dependence in the

literature, I will conclude that no existing notion of ontological dependence is either appropriate or clear enough to make a dependence claim on behalf of propositions – though at least one, the most often utilized modal notion of existential dependence, is clearly useful for framing a kind of *in*dependence claim for propositions, as a clear consequence of the ontological status of propositions as necessary, empirically independent beings argued for in chapter one. While I will develop a notion of conceptual dependence appropriate for framing what appear to be true claims of the mind-dependence of propositions, these turn out to be ontologically irrelevant, as they can play no part in grounding any significant ontological dependence claim about propositions.

This largely negative result, however, will not come to the fore until we have sufficiently developed and given air to the motivations and arguments mentioned above for construing propositions as significantly dependent, which will require a trip through some of the literature on the theory of functions, as the main argument I develop for the mind dependence of propositions concerns the suggestion that certain essential features of propositions, mentioned above, must be mind- or language- dependent features. The chapter nonetheless has important positive value in the context of the rest of the dissertation, especially that of the following chapter, first in that the negative results help to inoculate us against a certain kind of fallacy that might be suggested by certain key theses of minimalist ontology, and secondly, in the development of the notion of conceptual dependence, which will allow us to better articulate and and evaluate some of the key theses minimalist ontology. We will begin by trying to get a handle on the nature and consequences of the most basic and obvious dependence claims, and work our way toward more complicated theses involving propositions.

## 2. Naïve Dependence Claims: The Dependence of Words Upon Language.

Word and sentence types would appear to be the sorts of things that are dependent upon language; that they are, in one way or another, dependent upon language seems so obvious as to be almost trivial –and perhaps it is. But what can we mean when we make this sort of dependence claim, and what can we mean when we say, in particular, that words and the sentences they compose depend upon language? Let's take a closer look at this claim and the reasons one might offer for advancing it. It is likely that whatever we find here will be of use to us in making sense of dependence claims in general.

Perhaps one very basic but deceptively simple reason for asserting the language-dependence of words is just this: we are inclined to say that if something is a word, it exists *only in* or *as part of* some language or other (e.g. a natural language). But this seems ambiguous, and attempting to precisify it can issue in at least two similar but (as we will see) importantly distinct sorts of claims. First, it seems intuitively right to say that this is true in the sense that words *could not exist* if there were no language, at least of a certain kind (natural language and developments thereof). We would not want to call anything a word were it not part of some language; the very fact of some vocalization or mark (type) being considered a word seemingly requires its being linguistic in nature. But secondly, it could also be read as meaning that we could not *understand what a word is* without at least some understanding of what a language is, which also seems intuitively correct. (We may also want to say that languages themselves are in this way dependent upon words; perhaps languages, as we understand them, could not exist were there no

words, and the very notion of a language is such that it must be understood through the notion of a word. Words and languages are perhaps mutually dependent, in each of these ways.)<sup>13</sup>

Though we will have much more to say about it in the next section, I will assume that the first way of making sense of the claim that words are ontologically dependent upon language (that words could not exist were there not languages, which I will call ‘existential dependence’) is well enough understood for the time being. Turning, for the moment, to the second sense (in which words can be thought of as dependent on language) perhaps we might begin to roughly approximate the notion of dependence indicated as a kind of *conceptual* dependence. What is meant, perhaps, is that the concept of a language is dependent upon that of a word, in the sense that we can only conceive of a word as something that exists in the context of a language, such that one could not possess the concept of a word if one did not possess the concept of a language. But what exactly does this conceptual dependence consist in? Two intuitively plausible theses come to mind which might help us begin to clarify the notion of conceptual dependence being claimed on behalf of words in relation to language:

- a) In order to possess the concept of a word, one must (at least implicitly) possess the concept of a language.
- b) Part of the sense of “word” is just that if something (e.g. an utterance or inscription type) is a word, it plays some role in a language, or has a linguistic role.

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<sup>13</sup> Thanks to Amie Thomasson and Simon Evnine for this point. Other intuitive cases of seeming mutual dependence could be produced, such as literary fictions and the main characters portrayed in them. Kit Fine’s (1994b) framework for making sense of ontological dependence claims accounts for the possibility of mutual dependence, and being able to do so might be argued to be a plausible constraint on any account of ontological dependence.

The first claim (a) seems obvious and relatively innocuous, and is largely explained by the equally trivial b. No one can have the concept of a word without thereby having the concept of a language, and this is because part of the sense of “word,” or what we mean by it, is just that it is the kind of thing which plays such-and-such a role in some language. To choose an arbitrary example, one could not understand what the the sequence of marks denoted by the word “work” (or any number of corresponding sounds) was unless one could place it in the context of a language, such as English, in which it had a meaning, some grammatical role or something of the kind assigned to it. And parallel to this, one cannot understand what *kind* of thing it is, without understanding, at least implicitly, that it can be used to mean something according to how it is conventionally used in some language or other. The point here is that an understanding of the concept of a language, even if vague or incorrect in some ways, is necessary for an understanding of the concept of a word. This seems to be a legitimate and interesting way of understanding the claim being advanced, that the notion of a language is conceptually dependent on the notion of a word.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Ontological and Conceptual Notions of Dependence.

Each of these two readings of the dependence claim made above reflect a distinct

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<sup>14</sup> The notion of a word being discussed in this section is undoubtedly somewhat vague and inexact. It seems prudent to keep the discussion at this level, both because the points being made do not seem to require any further clarification, and because I do not want to become entangled in controversies surrounding the ontology of words. For instance, the following are all words: “bear,” “ran,” “is,” “not,” “implies,” all of which have distinct and often incompatible semantic, syntactic, and logical functions. The concept of a word, in natural language, encompasses all grammatical types (noun, verb, etc.) and many logical types as well (singular term, general term). The concept of a sentence is of course a great deal more specific in perhaps all of these ways, but it is that to the extent that it is even more obvious that the concept of a sentence is dependent on the concept of a language.



notion of dependence, each with its precedents in the history of philosophy, and each has been subsequently discussed and developed in the recent literature (Thomasson 1999, chapter 2; Fine 1994a, 1994b). And though the first is no doubt the more familiar one, no doubt the default setting through which many philosophers seem to intend and interpret dependence claims, we will see that there are other, less commonly utilized notions of dependence which are also relevant to our investigation into the nature of propositions.

*3.1: Existential Dependence.* The more familiar and intuitive of the two notions of ontological dependence we will discuss, instanced in the first reading of the above dependence claim about words, can be spelled out in terms of the notions of existence and necessity. One thing (A) is said to be dependent upon another thing (B) when necessarily, *a* exists only if *b* exists. (Thomasson 1999, 25) Let's call this *existential* dependence. The logical form of existential dependence claims can be articulated as follows:

*Existential Dependence* (ED), which obtains between two entities, *x* and *y*:

(ED) Necessarily, if *x* exists, then *y* exists.

To choose an uncontroversial example of ED, the performance of an individual speech act, such as that of uttering the sentence "English is Mike's first and only language," depends on the existence of the English language in precisely this way.

Sometimes, however, we wish to be able to state claims of dependence not between two specific entities *x* and *y*, but between a thing *x* and something or other of another kind, *F*. ED gives us the basis for articulating a more generic relation, understood as follows:

*Generic Existential Dependence* (GED), which obtains between an entity  $x$  and some or other entity of the kind  $F$ :

(GED) Necessarily, if  $x$  exists, then some  $F$  or other exists.

An example of GED would be the dependence of the United States (*qua* republic) on there being some person or other which is a citizen of that republic. No particular person need be a citizen for there to be such a nation, but there needs to be some *person* or other who is legally a citizen for there to be such a republic.

*3.1.1. Problems with existential dependence.* Despite its being a familiar, intuitive understanding of how one thing can literally depend upon another, the existential account of dependence is not without its faults. For our purposes, we can divide the problems into two categories, the first containing problems with the notion itself, and the second containing a problem concerning the usefulness of the notion for investigating the mind- and language- dependence or independence of propositions.

In the first category are two separate problems. One of these is simply that the notion of existential dependence seems to render true some claims that run directly counter to our ordinary intuitions about the truth value of simple dependence claims. Consider the example of an object, Socrates, and the set containing that object as its sole member (the singleton Socrates).<sup>15</sup> It appears correct to say that sets depend on their members and not vice versa. But given the form of the claim, framed as it is in terms of existence and necessity, it will also be true that Socrates depends upon the singleton Socrates, for there is presumably no world in which Socrates exists without the set. As Kit Fine (1994b, 271) has pointed out, this is a pretty counterintuitive result, and similar

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<sup>15</sup> The example is borrowed from Fine (1994b) p. 271, who gives a wealth of other examples, as well as other sorts of criticisms not discussed here.

examples could be multiplied at will. Nonetheless, it seems we would have to swallow such consequences if we wished to frame our dependence claims in terms of the notions of existence and necessity.

Perhaps a more troubling problem for existential dependence is the fact that, if ED is a genuine and significant form of dependence, it turns out that *everything* is dependent upon necessarily existing items, as numbers and propositions are often held to be (Fine, 1994b, 271). Again, according to ED, one thing (A) is dependent on another (B) just in case necessarily, if A exists then B exists. But if the number 2 and the proposition that snow is white are both necessary existents,<sup>16</sup> everything will turn out to be dependent on them. For if it is necessarily the case that 2 exists, then for any  $x$ , it will necessarily be the case that if  $x$  exists then 2 exists, no matter what  $x$  is. So for instance, Socrates himself will turn out to be dependent upon the number two. There is, however, no reason to think that the nature or existence of Socrates has *anything* to do with the number two. On reflection, then, this could lead one to doubt the usefulness of the notion of existential dependence in making metaphysically significant claims in general.

We may not want to rest with such a strong conclusion, however. Recent work in the ontology of fiction (see Searle 1979; Thomasson 1999; Schiffer 2003) and the ontology of music (See Levinson 1990) has produced theories which hold that fictional characters and musical works are contingently existing abstracta which depend for their existence (in seemingly the exact way stated in ED) upon contingently existing entities like writers and composers. According to such theories, these entities are essentially created by human beings engaging in literary and musico-compositional practices, and

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, that snow is white might not be necessarily existing if you're a Russellian about propositions and an Aristotelian about properties.

thus depend upon those human beings for their existence. We certainly do not wish to discount these claims, and the notion of existential dependence seems the most accurate way to say what we mean correctly. Perhaps, then, we can amend the original construal of ED above by prefixing it with the words “...which obtains between two objects,  $x$  and  $y$ , where neither  $x$  nor  $y$  necessarily exists.” This would also seem to capture one of the senses in which words are dependent upon language, while avoiding the latter difficulty, at least, if we assume that word types are not necessary existents.

But even supposing that the amended version of existential dependence is a significant ontological relation (and it should be clear that nothing here hangs on whether or not it is), we should also notice that it cannot be used to describe any significant metaphysical relation obtaining between propositions and mind, language, or human beings. As was argued in chapter one, propositions are necessarily existing entities, thus the stipulation that existential dependence apply only when the dependent and dependee are *not* necessarily existing excludes propositions from consideration. Thus even if we grant that the unamended notion of existential dependence can be made sense of for contingent existents, or that the counterexamples are somehow misleading or can be avoided, it is clear that propositions cannot be dependent in this way –they must be existentially independent of language, mind, or any aspect of our own existence and practices in any significant way.

From here we move on to considering other notions of dependence, but before we do, the reader should be aware that, despite our having given sound reasons for concluding that the notions of existential dependence and independence will be of little value in attempting to establish that propositions are ontologically dependent upon us, the

notion will become relevant again below. Later on, in section four of this chapter, we will consider the possibility that certain essential features of propositions can be derived from their relation to our capacity for intentionality. A consideration of these ideas is quite independently motivated, and as we will find, our conclusions here about existential dependence will inform our evaluation of those ideas, and will be presupposed in that discussion.

*3.2. Definitional Dependence.* Another explicitly ontological notion of dependence, developed and discussed in the recent literature by Kit Fine (1994a, 1994b) with an eye towards the general sorts of difficulties embedded in the notion of existential dependence, is what we might call *definitional* dependence. A key presupposition to making sense of definitional dependence appears to be that there is a significant dependence relation that can occur between the nature, identity, or being of two objects (Fine 1994b, 270). Thus, we are to understand a relation of dependence as occurring between two objects, *a* and *b*, when the the identity of *a*, or as Fine says, “what *a* is”, depends on *b*, or perhaps the identity of *b* (“what *b* is”). According to this account, by listing the objects upon which the nature or identity of an object *a* depends, we are, in a sense, giving a *definition* of that object (or perhaps a definition of ‘what it is’). Just as we can give a *nominal* definition of a term ‘*a*’ by giving the terms through which we are to understand ‘*a*’ (Fine 1994b, 275), according to Fine, one can analogously give the *real* (as opposed to nominal) definition of an *object*. By specifying the objects upon which *a* depends, one thereby gives a definition of *a*.

As Fine concedes, ontological dependence can seem to be a pretty obscure notion

(1994b, 270), and the notion of a thing's nature or identity is also quite obscure, so we might begin to think that any notion spelled out in terms of these would be doubly obscure. Nonetheless, we might also envision a proper place for such a notion in our metaphysical theories if we are convinced, for whatever reasons, that we can discuss the nature and essence of a thing (or type of thing) independently of whether that thing exists (for most types of things, at least). This does appear to be the sort of thing we can do, when we talk, for instance, about the nature of unicorns, despite the fact that they do not exist.

The main thrust of this account of dependence is encompassed in the following claims. First, for each object  $x$ , there is a set of truths about that object (i.e. true propositions)  $P_1$ -  $P_n$ , such that the identity or nature of that object can in some sense be said to be the *source* of these truths. (1994b, 275, 277) The properties attributed to the object in the propositions that are said to be true in virtue of the nature of the object are those that are essential to that object (they constitute the *essence* of the object), whereas those that are not, are inessential. (1994b, 277-8) Secondly, if we assume that properties can intelligibly be said to have objects as constituents, we can then identify those objects which constitute the essential properties of an object  $x$  (i.e. those that are involved in the essence of  $x$ ) as the objects upon which  $x$ 's identity or nature depends. (1994b, 277) Thus, in Fine's favored example, we are to consider such a relation to account for the dependence of the singleton Socrates upon Socrates himself; it is an essential property of the singleton Socrates to contain Socrates as its sole member, and Socrates himself is supposed to be a constituent of this property. In this way, Socrates is involved in the nature of the set, and is thus part of the *definition* of that object.

Definitional dependence could be one way of spelling out, in an explicitly ontological way that avoids the difficulties noted for existential dependence, the claim that words are dependent upon language. Perhaps we could say that it is true in virtue of the identity of the word “work” that it is part of standard English, and that the English language (considered as an abstract object) is a constituent of the property of being part of standard English, issuing in a claim of definitional dependence between the word and the language. This way of spelling out the relation also would appear to have some convenient parallels with the claim that the concept of a word depends upon the concept of a language. For just as we do not seem to be able to understand the concept of a word without having the concept of a language, we can now also claim that one cannot understand *what a word is* without having some understanding of *what a language is*. Similarly, just as we might say that the concept of a word involves the concept of a language, now we can make the explicitly ontological claim that the nature of a word (what it is) involves the nature of a language. This may be of use to us in our investigation, since we presumably will be investigating the *nature* of propositions.

*3.2.1. Problems With Definitional Dependence.* While Fine’s account of definitional dependence clearly avoids the objections and problems that were raised against the standard account of existential dependence (for more on this see Fine 1994b, 271-4), the supposition that we can literally define an *object*, or ‘what it is’, sounds dangerously close to a category mistake. Though I am sympathetic to the account and to some of its insights, substantial development and clarification beyond the scope of this essay may have to be carried out in order to determine whether it can really be useful in the study of propositions. We will here simply state some of the reasons for putting it aside.

One worry is that Fine's account makes heavy (if not entirely unintuitive) use of the notion of the notion of the "identity" or "nature" of an object (which is supposed to be interchangeable with "what it is"), but tells us no more about what an object's identity or nature is than that it somehow 'determines' or makes true certain propositions about the object. And without any sort of story about how an object or the nature of an object can *determine* truths of any kind, or any sense given to what it means for what something is to determine truths about that thing, such talk might seem less than fully enlightening.

Following up on this worry, we might also suspect that the idea that we can in any literal sense define an *object* (or what it is) involves something like a category mistake. Ordinarily speaking, the only sorts of things for which we can offer definitions (whether it be of the sort that lexicographers compile for us, or the kind philosophers have traditionally been supposed to be trying to offer us) in any literal sense are bits of language, i.e. symbols such as words, phrases, and so on. What this account would seem to imply, in insisting that the identity of an object is somehow the *source* of truths about it, is that the identity of something (again, "what it is") is essentially propositional in nature, or literally consisting in or composed of propositions. But this is surely a strange deviation from our normal assumptions about the relations between propositions (or any other sort of representation) and the world. What we normally assume is that the identity of some object can be articulated or represented by the propositions or sentences which express the essential truths about that object. But given this, we're warranted in saying rather that the propositions which express such truths *reflect* or *represent* the object's identity in virtue of *being about* the object in the right sorts of ways, not that they



*constitute* what we're calling the identity, in any literal sense.

One final worry is that, as we've seen, in order for the account to make sense of the idea that the essence of a given object *involves* objects in some ontologically significant way, we must assume that the properties that make up the essence of an object have objects *as constituents*. (1994b, 276) But this can seem a puzzling sort of assumption; the most obvious interpretation of the idea would seem to involve a confusion between properties and sets; for instance, the set of all blue things contains blue objects as constituents, but unless we make the implausible assumption that the property of being blue, or blueness, simply is the set of all blue things, it would make no sense to say the property itself has objects as constituents. This, of course, is nothing we want to cast upon Fine's account without further clarification and argument, at least. However, without some other and more plausible story about what it means for properties to have objects as constituents, merely stating that they do will do us little more good than to point us to an aspect of the account that needs some serious filling in.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps, then, we had better explore a more intuitively familiar notion, that of conceptual dependence. After all, as was noted above, there is a rather ordinary notion of conceptual dependence which seems roughly parallel to the notion of definitional dependence that Fine articulates. And it seems far less of a leap to say that concepts contain or involve other concepts, or that, since bits of language can be properly said to be defined, something similar can be done for the concepts that they express. Let's see what sorts of results we can sustain, then, with an intuitive form of conceptual

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<sup>17</sup> Fine explicitly states this as an assumption to the definitional account, but doesn't defend it, explain what "constituent" means in the present context, or point to another place in the literature where one might find such things.

dependence, keeping in mind the insights gleaned from a close study of existential and definitional dependence.

*3.3. Conceptual Dependence.* Let's turn now to a third possible reading of the claim that words are dependent upon language, which we've been calling "conceptual dependence." We said that one way to understand the claim that words are dependent upon language was that one could not understand the concept of a word if one had no concept of a language. We could thus understand the dependence of one thing (or kind) upon another in terms of what is involved in the concepts of the items (or kinds of items) in question, rather than in terms of existence and necessity, or in terms of nature and essence. In this sense, one thing  $x$  is dependent upon another  $y$  when the the concept of  $x$  involves or contains the concept of  $y$ . Thus, in our running example, the concept of a word is held to essentially involve the concept of a language (or of language in general).

*3.3.1. Conceptual Truth and Conceptual Containment.* In trying to ground a claim of definitional dependence, we saw that there were essentially two steps: first we determine which propositions about an object are made true or "determined" by the nature of that object, and then we determine which further objects are 'constituents' of that object. But it seems we can understand the basis for these sorts of steps as issuing from claims about the concept or notion of an object or kind, without invoking the notions of "nature" or "essence." Each step has a kind of paralell or analogue at the conceptual level. First, we determine what sort of (relevant) concept a given object falls under –perhaps by determining which is the most 'basic sortal' concept that applies to it (Thomasson 2007, 210) (e.g. "person" is a basic sortal, to which we may apply and reapply to the same

named individual so long as it exists, whereas “brunette” is a derivative sortal to which we may only apply to a named individual on the condition that they still have dark hair). In our running example, we thus have the concept of a word. Once we have the concept in mind, we can then ask what conceptual truths involve that concept. To choose a less controversial and well-worn example, consider the proposition that all bachelors are male. There are many ways of articulating what it is about this true proposition that distinguishes it from other true propositions involving the notion of a bachelor, such as that some bachelors are college freshmen. But one intuitive and fairly common way is to say that the first is true simply in virtue of the concepts involved or expressed, whereas the second is not. More precisely, we can say that the first is true because it is true that the *concept* of a bachelor is the *concept* of an unmarried male, whereas we can say no such thing about the second. While the concept of a bachelor is such that it determines that all and every object to which it applies is male, there is nothing in the application conditions (or if you wish, fulfillment or satisfaction conditions) of “bachelor” to determine that it applies to anything which is (or is not) a college freshman (*qua* college freshman). In virtue of this, we can say that the proposition that all bachelors are male is a conceptual truth, whereas the proposition that some bachelors are college freshmen is not.

The second step at the conceptual level, in making a dependence claim, will be to determine what further concepts are involved by looking at the conceptual truths, i.e. we can see that the concept of a bachelor involves the concept of a male, whereas it does not involve (or exclude) the concept of a college freshman. Ordinarily this should be fairly

easy once we have determined the relevant conceptual truths.<sup>18</sup> Let us call this kind of involvement, instanced in the way that the concept of a bachelor involves the concept of a male, *conceptual containment*; the concept of a bachelor contains the concept of a male, but not that of a college freshman.

We now have a fairly straightforward way of understanding a dependence relation at the conceptual level; a concept is dependent upon all those concepts which it contains. By extension, then, one thing or kind A will be conceptually dependent upon a thing or kind B when the concept of A depends (via containment) upon the concept of B. This also gives us an interesting way of understanding the dependence of words (conceived, again, as types) upon language. For as we noted in section 2, words appear to be essentially bits of, or parts of language. This is because the concept of a word is the concept of something which (at least) plays a linguistic role, i.e. plays some specified role or roles in some language or other. But the concept of playing a linguistic role itself clearly involves the concept of language. Since we will assume that conceptual dependence, like most other forms of dependence, is a transitive relation, it follows that the concept of a word depends upon the concept of a language, and thus that words are conceptually dependent upon language.

In the foregoing, I'll adopt the following convention for symbolizing conceptual dependence claims: "A {B}" is equivalent to "The concept of A contains the concept of

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<sup>18</sup> I am not, however, claiming that there will not be difficult and perhaps even intractable issues concerning the identities or fulfillment conditions of concepts. At least sometimes we may determine fairly easily that all A are B and that this is a conceptual truth, so that the concept of A contains that concept of B. But, supposing that we also discover that the concept of A contains the concept of C, where C seems to be pretty much the same concept as B, there may be no clear or determinate answer whether a B is the same thing as a C. This sort of issue may be very difficult to settle for many of our ordinary concepts (e.g. 'dog' and 'canine').

B.” Thus, the above claim that the concept of a bachelor contains the concept of a male would be symbolized

BM) bachelor {male.

The notion of conceptual containment may seem to make sense with regards to run of the mill examples such as that of “bachelor’ and “male,” but you may well wonder how we should talk about cases of mutual dependence such as that which most likely obtains between “word” and “language;” the metaphor of containment does not seem to make much sense in describing that sort of mutuality. In such cases (none of which arise below) we might say that there is mutual conceptual involvement, and symbolize it as follows:

WL/LW) word} {language.

#### **4. Truth- Evaluability and Mind- Dependence.**

In this section I will investigate the idea that the concept of a proposition, in virtue of containing the concept of truth- evaluability, may be mind- dependent. The reason for exploring this possibility bears direct relevance to the question of whether a proposition ontology is a deflationary or minimalist ontology. Intuitively speaking, it seems right to say that if something is dependent upon us, or upon some feature of us, such as our capacity for certain sorts of mental states, in any significant way, this may be a reason (which I’ll explore in the following chapter) for thinking that the correct ontological account of that thing will be a deflationary or minimalist one. We need to see whether propositions can be said to be dependent upon us (e.g. in virtue of being either mind or

language- dependent) in any significant way as an important step toward determining what relation, if any, obtains between dependence (on us or some feature of us) and deflationary or minimal ontological status.

*4.1. Truth Evaluability.* In chapter one it was argued that it is among the most central and fundamental characteristics of propositions (perhaps *the most* central) that they are truth- evaluable. Of course, this is not to say, of any given proposition, that it has been or will be evaluated in such terms by anybody. Being the sorts of things which are capable of being evaluated in terms of truth and falsity is underpinned by the characteristic of propositions that they are, independently of whether anyone thinks so, true or false, i.e. by their being *truth- bearers*.

The first thesis I will investigate here is that the concept of truth- evaluability inherently involves the concept of mind. If this is the case, anything for which it is a conceptual truth that that thing is truth- evaluable is therefore conceptually mind- dependent. I will have to do a good deal of motivating before we can see the initial plausibility behind this claim. But before we can do this even, we will need to state clearly why we should think that it is a conceptual truth that propositions are truth evaluable. First, we can point out, in light of what was argued in the first chapter, that the property of being truth- bearers certainly seems to underlie and make possible most, if not all of the other characteristics and theoretical roles assigned to them according to traditional proposition theory. Again, they are the objects of our propositional attitudes, and thus, given that belief is a relation between a believer and a proposition, that in virtue of which our beliefs are true or false. Being true or false also clearly underlies the

possibility of propositions being the objects of logical relations, and of being the content of our linguistic utterances. Some would go as far as to say that propositions are the *fundamental* bearers of truth and falsity, or that *in virtue of which* sentences and beliefs are true or false, and that in virtue of which sentences or beliefs can bear logical relations to other sentences and beliefs. Indeed, it's hard to imagine how we could make sense of proposition theory, as traditionally proposed, were we not to presuppose something like this about propositions. This seems good enough reason to say that if there are propositions, then being truth-bearers (and thus being truth-evaluable) is a real feature of them.<sup>19</sup>

But it is quite a step from saying that propositions really are truth-evaluable to saying that it is a conceptual truth that they are. We need a reason for thinking that the concept of a proposition involves the concept of being true or false in such a way as to make it a conceptual truth that propositions are true or false. We can begin to see why this is a reasonable claim by calling attention to a feature of our discussion of the nature of propositions in chapter one: that what a proposition is, or what our concept of a proposition is, appears to be wholly determined by the conceptual and theoretical roles philosophers have introduced the term "proposition" to play. Part of the sense of the term "proposition" is just that, whatever else they are (e.g. whatever other theoretical roles they happen to play, or whatever their ontological status turns out to be), they are the

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<sup>19</sup> Of course, it's reasonable to wonder whether all propositions are, strictly speaking, true or false. For instance, if you're an indeterminist, you might think that at present, many propositions about the future are indeterminate, and thus neither true nor false. Similarly, we may want to say that there are lots of propositions that are neither true nor false on the grounds that they have mistaken presuppositions (e.g. The proposition that Mike has stopped beating his wife, where Mike has no wife, or has beaten no one). While dealing with these sorts of objections may complicate the argument somewhat, it seems they could not undermine it, and so I just set them aside.

sorts of things that we believe and the sorts of things among which logical relations obtain. Thus, if it's part of the concept of a proposition to be the things we believe and to be the things among which logical relations hold, and playing these theoretical roles essentially presupposes being truth- evaluable, then it is also the case that truth evaluability is part of the concept of a proposition. To put the same point in a slightly different way, if it's a conceptual truth that propositions are logical relata or the things we believe, and it's a conceptual truth that both sorts of things are truth- evaluable, then it's a conceptual truth that propositions are truth- evaluable:

1) Proposition {Truth- evaluability.

*4.2. Assessability for Accuracy and Functioning- as.* The next step is to point out that truth and falsity are species of accuracy and inaccuracy, so that if it's a conceptual truth that something is truth- evaluable, it is similarly a conceptual truth that it is assessable in terms of accuracy and inaccuracy. As we've seen, it's a conceptual truth that propositions are truth- evaluable. From this it follows that it's a conceptual truth that they are assessable in terms of accuracy and inaccuracy (they are either true or false, and hence accurate or inaccurate):

2) Truth- Evaluability {Assessability for Accuracy.

Given the transitivity of conceptual dependence, from 1 and 2 it follows that the concept of a proposition depends on the concept of assessability for accuracy, or

3) Proposition {Assessability for Accuracy.

Now comes the crucial step; if we want to establish that propositions are conceptually mind- dependent, we must demonstrate that the concept of being assessable for accuracy



and inaccuracy contains the concept of mind, or at least the concept of something essentially mental in nature (for instance, the concept of an essentially mental state). To this end, I will examine theories of function, on the promising assumption that the sorts of things which can be said to be accurate or inaccurate indicators of this or that can usually be described as *having the function to represent something*.

Before spelling out this claim, it may help to make a distinction between two ways in which one thing can represent another. Sometimes, we say that an object or phenomenon (A) represents something else (B) simply in the sense that A *stands-for* B (e.g. as when we stipulate that a dot on a map represents an object at a location). It literally stands for the object when the object is or cannot be present for our inspection. We may say of the whole representational construct, containing the map and the dot, that it has a content, i.e. represents things *as being thus and so*, but it seems right to say that the dot itself, insofar as it stands-for the object by stipulation, possesses no content, and is not, by itself, assessable for accuracy. To be distinguished from this is the kind of representation that the map and dot construct compose, which I will call an *indicator*; in this sense, one thing (A) represents another (B) in the sense that A indicates B (*that things are thus and so*). Anything that takes the A- place in such a representational relation is an indicator. What is being advanced here is that among representations, only those which are indicators can be assessed for accuracy, and this sort of criterion of evaluation is applied in virtue of that fact that they represent things as being thus and so. More formally:

4) Assessability for Accuracy{Indicator.

The main claim to be considered here is that we will be able to understand the concept of

an indicator through the concept of function; in particular, the function to indicate. The intuition to investigate here, which is common to very different theories of function, is that something possesses a function not as a *sui generis* property, but in virtue of other properties it has, or in relation to other sorts of entities, events, or properties. In other words, along with 4, we are also looking for a validation of something like the following:

5) Indicator{Function (to indicate).

From 4 and 5 it would then follow that

6) Assessability for Accuracy{Function (to indicate)

A theory of function, in so far as it purports to give an account of how or why (i.e. what it is *in virtue of which*) something which represents or indicates something beyond itself *has* or *acquires* the function to do so, would appear to have the potential to help us make sense of this feature of propositions. There is, however, more than one way of making sense of the idea that something has a function, and thus more than one way of making sense of the function to indicate; for the notion of a function has been elucidated in (at least) two mutually exclusive ways, both naturalistically and intentionalistically, and much hangs on whether a thing *x*'s functioning to *y* is to be explained in naturalistic or intentional terms. Obviously, we need to determine whether we can account for propositions' being truth- evaluable in terms of a theory of function, but in doing so, we will have to determine which, if any, of the current sorts of theories available in the literature of function can do this for us. For if we can get a perfectly good account of this feature of propositions naturalistically, and therefore in a way which makes no use of intentional or otherwise mental notions, the attempt to link the concept of a proposition to the concept of the mental will seem highly unmotivated. With that in mind, we will first

examine and try to apply a naturalistic account of function to the notion of a proposition.

4.2.1. *Naturalistic Function.* Naturalistic accounts of the nature of function for us to examine have been offered or endorsed by Ruth Millikan (1984) and Fred Dretske (1995), among others. An important characteristic of these theories is that they allow for a sense of function such that we can understand one thing  $x$ 's functioning to  $y$  without recourse to any sort of intentionalistic idioms, and thus, independently of mind. For example, consider the so called bee- dances, which we can intuitively describe as having the function to indicate a source of nectar to other bees in its hive.<sup>20</sup>

According to a naturalistic account of function, such as Ruth Millikan's, the bee dances possess this sort of function in virtue of being members of *reproductively established families*, or things grouped together according to their having similar characteristics, where the fact that they possess these similar characteristics is to be explained in virtue of their being reproduced in a similar way, in a special sense of 'reproduction'. According to Millikan, one thing B is a reproduction of another thing A if 1) B has some determinate properties in common with A, and 2) that A and B have these properties in common can be explained by natural law or suitably specified laws operative in situ (1984, 19).<sup>21</sup> Reproductively established families can be divided into two kinds: First order and higher- order, though we can fruitfully confine our attention to those of the first order. First order reproductively established families are described by Millikan as follows:

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, despite the fact that we can "intuitively describe" the situation in this way, by using a common sense notion of function, Millikan is clear (1984,18) in that she does not intend her use of the terms "function" and "proper function" to be anything like a conceptual analysis of the common sense notion of function, but instead are to be taken as technical terms, designed to solve certain philosophical problems.

<sup>21</sup> To see the specific constraints Millikan imposes on these laws, see her 1984, 19.

Any set of entities having the same or similar reproductively established characters derived by repetitive reproductions from the same character of the same model or models forms a first order reproductively established family. (1984, 19)

Such things as screwdrivers and word tokens possess functions in virtue of being members of these first order families, since the functional aspects of screwdrivers (their ability to tighten or loosen screws) and individual word tokens (presumably, what they contribute to the content of a sentence) are had in virtue of being modelled on other such items; with word tokens, for instance, however they are physically reproduced, are reproduced on the model of previous inscriptions or utterances.

Millikan's naturalistic account makes clear how we can make sense of the fact that such dances (among many other things) can have the function to indicate this or that in *purely causal terms*, since being a member of a reproductively established family is to be explained according to natural (scientific) laws. We can thus make sense of crucial features of something's possessing a function, such as the character of its *having as a goal* or its *being supposed to* guide bees to a food source in terms entirely devoid of intentional notions, without remainder. So, if propositions can be said to contain the concept of being truth- evaluable in virtue of their having the function to indicate, and if their having the function to indicate can be accounted for naturalistically (in virtue of propositions being members of reproductively established families), then the concept of a proposition cannot be said to involve any inherently mental concepts in virtue of possessing a function to indicate; being assessible for accuracy and inaccuracy, which is the crucial characteristic which points to propositions having a function simply does not involve any inherently mental concepts.

This, however, needn't worry the propositionalist hoping for a mind- dependent account of propositions. For there are otherwise obvious and seemingly overwhelming

difficulties in trying to use a naturalistic account of function to make sense of propositions' being assessible for accuracy and inaccuracy. As was said above, the notion of a reproductively established family, which must apply to an item if we are to give a naturalistic account of some function of it, is an essentially *causal* notion. More generally, in order for any account of function to be a *naturalistic* one, it would seem it must also have some essentially causal schema for explaining a given object's possessing a given function. But clearly, this precludes the possibility of giving an account of the purported function of propositions to represent in naturalistic terms, since, as was argued in chapter 1, propositions do not appear to have the kinds of causal properties required to be counted as members of any reproductively established families; it makes no sense in this sort of context, for instance, to say that propositions are reproductions or that any single proposition is "modelled" after any other, given that they are necessarily existing abstracta. Plainly speaking, both the existence of propositions and the sorts of properties they have cannot be explained in causal terms, and so the representative capacity of propositions (i.e. which consists largely of the fact that they are truth- evaluable), cannot be accounted for in naturalistic terms.

*4.2.2. Intentionalistic Function.* Naturally, the best place to look for an alternative, especially given that we want to know whether the concept of assessibility for accuracy and inaccuracy contains the concept of mind (or some inherently mental concept), would be an intentionalistic account of function, or one which utilizes irreducibly intentional notions in giving an account of how something has or acquires the function to such-and-such. This would include the theory of function discussed by John Searle (1995, 13- 23), among others.

The import of an intentionalistic theory of function is that when an item possesses a function, such as that of an odometer to indicate distance travelled in a car, it does so in virtue of having that function *imposed upon* or *assigned to* it, and that such imposition of function upon objects and phenomena can only be carried out by beings with intentional mental states, such as ourselves.<sup>22</sup>

The intentionalistic theory of function, as articulated by Searle, is best understood and motivated in the context of a set of broader metaphysical distinctions, each of which relies upon notions of existential dependence and independence. The first is that between ontological objectivity and ontological subjectivity, a distinction which applies to objects (Searle 1995, 8). An object is said to be *ontologically objective* (OO) just in case its mode of existence is independent of any mental state or states. Intuitively speaking mountains are OO, since they exist in possible worlds in which minds do not. This is distinguished from *ontologically subjective* (OS) objects, whose mode of existence depends on mental states. OS entities include pains, according to Searle, since they would not exist were there no mental states.

A second distinction is that between properties that are intrinsic to nature and those that are observer- relative (1995, 9-13). Given some object O, we can distinguish between its intrinsic and observer relative properties in the following way. Some property of O is *intrinsic* to it if it has that property independently of the intentionality of any being who uses, observes, or is otherwise intentionally related to O. Being covered

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<sup>22</sup> Searle certainly intends his theory of function to be an account of anything and everything which can be described as possessing a function of any kind; according to him, all functions are intentionalistic functions, and thus there is no such thing as naturalistic function (1999, 14). But we needn't insist on this in order to use this sort of account to make sense of how some things acquire functions.

with snow, for instance, would be an intrinsic property of a mountain in this sense, since whether it is covered with snow has nothing to do with there being any attitudes taken toward it. Some property of O is *observer- relative* if O's having that property is dependent upon attitudes which beings such as ourselves, having intentional mental states, take towards O. Being the location of slopes for a mountain ski resort would be an observer- relative property of the mountain, since it would not have that property were it not for the attitudes we (or beings relevantly similar to us) take to it. The main difference between this and the prior distinction appears to be that that the ontological objectivity/ subjectivity distinction is intended to apply to objects, whereas the intrinsic/observer- relative distinction applies to properties, but we can certainly point out the obvious relations between them. Having an observer- relative property is clearly OS –there could be no such thing as having such a feature were there no intentional mental states, on the intentionalistic theory, and having an intrinsic property is OO, since having such a property, by definition, has nothing to do with intentional mental states, and therefore will not depend on their existence.

According to the intentionalistic theory, any object which can correctly be said to have a function can only be said to do so in virtue of the attitudes of users, observers, or beings otherwise (existentially) related to the object or phenomena in virtue of intentional mental states. All functions are therefore observer- relative features of the objects which have them, and are thus ontologically subjective. For instance, by intentionally using a large rock to keep a pile of letters on one's desk from being carried away by the wind, one thereby *imposes* the function of paperweight upon the rock. By consciously and intentionally using the rock to further one's purpose, one does two things to the rock

which constitute its having the function of paperweight. First, one places the object within a teleology—a goal, purpose, or system thereof; simply by using the rock for a certain purpose, it comes to possess the purpose, or function, of weighting down one’s letters. Secondly, by involving the object within a teleology, or giving it a purpose, one makes it the case that the object, *qua* one’s intention to serve a certain purpose, a) is *supposed to* cause or otherwise result in the successful fulfilling of that purpose, and b) is evaluable as good or bad at serving its function. According to Searle, these are irreducibly normative features of the language of functions (1995, 19).

A third and final distinction is of critical importance for the intentionalistic theory of function thus outlined. We also often say of things that they possess functions, though no one need have consciously intended to put them to any sort of use, as such things as paperweights and odometers are. We say, for instance, that the function of the heart is to pump blood, that the function of the teeth is to chew food, and so on, and we say this sort of thing of creatures for which we have no evidence of behavior indicating consciousness of these sorts of goals whatsoever. Functions of the first kind, which include odometers and paperweights, are called *agentive* functions (Searle 1995, 20). An object’s possessing a function is agentive if it has the function in virtue of its having been used intentionally by a conscious agent for a certain purpose, e.g. that of weighting down paper (a paperweight), or indicating distance travelled in an automobile (odometer). Agentive functions are distinguished from *nonagentive* functions, which are those functions imposed upon “naturally occurring objects and processes” as part of a theoretical account of the phenomena in question (1995, 20). Thus, our correct attribution of function to the heart and teeth need not presuppose that we or any other



creature consciously intend to use them in such a way, or that they were designed for such purposes (in the case of the heart, consciousness is usually wholly bypassed). But, in so far as our theoretical accounts of the nature of cordates presupposes that survival and reproduction are values for these beings, the heart becomes part of a teleology, and thereby comes to possess a function. It also thereby comes to be subject to terms of evaluation –a heart that does not pump blood efficiently is not a good heart.

Whether a function is agentive or nonagentive, however, it should be clear why anything that possesses a function, on the intentionalistic account, thereby possesses a mind- dependent property. At least one of the features central to possessing a function, that of being placed within a teleology, constitute observer- relative features and are hence mind- dependent; its existence requires the existence of the mental states. Being placed within a teleology requires the existence of purposes, and purposes, whether or not anyone consciously has or assigns them, can only exist if there are beings which are capable of having them. But only the sorts of beings capable of having purposes are those which possess intentional mental states.

With these distinctions in hand, and a basic grasp of the intentionalist theory of function, we can begin to see what might motivate the thesis that propositions are mind- dependent, via the intentionalist thesis that anything which is an indicator must be so in virtue of having the function to indicate. Any ordinary indicator one considers, such as an odometer, a sentence, or a traffic sign, is such that we can account for its being an indicator in virtue of our imposing that function upon it; they have this property, and the corollary feature of being assessable for accuracy, in virtue of our own intentional stances toward them. The very notion of any of these things appears to involve the notion of

mind or of intentional mental states of some kind. If we could establish that the analogous feature of propositions, truth- evaluability, were similarly a mind- dependent feature, then given that the very notion of a proposition is the notion of something with such a feature essentially, we could construct an argument to the effect propositions themselves are conceptually mind- dependent.

*4.2.3. Problems Applying the Intentionalistic Approach.* If propositions can be understood through the intentionalistic framework as having the function to indicate (*qua* being assessable for accuracy), then we have the basis for an argument that propositions are mind- dependent. However, there appear to be good reasons for thinking that the intentionalistic framework, as articulated here, cannot be of any use in giving us an understanding of propositions' assessability for accuracy.

The main reasons for thinking that propositions cannot possess the function to indicate, so construed, stems from the fact that the notion of dependence figuring in the distinctions between ontologically objective and subjective entities/phenomena and intrinsic and observer- relative features is clearly that of existential dependence. We've already seen persuasive reasons for thinking either that propositions are existentially mind- independent or that the notion of existential dependence can have no application to propositions (section 3.1.1.). But it is worthwhile to see exactly why the specific feature we are attempting to understand through the theory of function, that of assessability for accuracy, cannot be so understood in the case of propositions. This is especially important given that there is real intuitive appeal to an understanding of the notion of indicating (*qua* species of representing) as something done only in virtue of an object's being somehow related (e.g. by imposition or assignment) to intentional mental states.

Again, the proposal is that we understand a crucial feature of propositions, that of being assessable for accuracy, of being had in virtue of having the function to indicate.

Why this is so plausible is best put by Searle (although not while endorsing any sort of claim about propositions):

Sometimes the agentive function assigned to an object is that of standing for or representing something else. ... because “representing” and “standing for” are just other names for intentionality, in this case we have intentionally imposed intentionality on objects and states of affairs that are not intrinsically intentional. (1995, p. 21)

There is a real intuitive pull toward the supposition that anything not a mental state possessing intentionality must have it in virtue of some relation, such as imposition, to mental states, that mental states are the only sorts of things that are intrinsically or fundamentally intentional. According to the intentionalistic theory, all functions are observer relative features, and all observer- relative features are ontologically subjective, or existentially dependent on mental states, so that if anything that is assessable for accuracy and inaccuracy must (in virtue of its possessing this feature) possess the function to indicate, assessability for accuracy must be existentially dependent upon mental states. Essentially, what this means is that there can only be entities that are assessable for accuracy in a world if there are mental states in that world.

Now, let's assume that it's only a contingent truth that there are mental states – that it's possible that, and therefore that there are possible worlds in which, there are no mental states. It follows that the existence of items that are assessable for accuracy is also a *contingent* fact. And, as we said above, in most ordinary contexts, this is plausible –it's hard to imagine a world in which there are things which function to indicate or stand for anything, a world in which there is anything like a sentence, an odometer, or a stop sign, but there are no mental states. It is, however, a clear (and well- motivated)

assumption of traditional proposition theory that propositions exist necessarily. What should be equally clear is that propositions possess the property of being assessable for accuracy and inaccuracy essentially, that is, propositions are assessable for accuracy in every world in which they exist. This follows from 3 above, which was argued for in section 4.2; because the concept of a proposition contains the concept of assessability for accuracy, nothing would count as a proposition in a world if it were not assessable for accuracy in that world. From this it follows that propositions are assessable for accuracy in every world in which they exist –which I argued in chapter 1 to be every possible world. It clearly follows from this that something is assessable for accuracy in every possible world, i.e it is *not* a contingent fact that there are items assessable for accuracy and inaccuracy. In other words, on the assumption that propositions are assessable for accuracy in virtue of having the function to indicate, the intentionalistic framework cannot accommodate the fact that propositions are *intrinsically* assessable for accuracy, rather than having it as an observer- relative feature.

Perhaps we should summarize clearly the problem concerning how we ought to construe the feature of propositions that they are assessable for accuracy as we've now come to it. I think it can be represented as the following set of well- motivated by mutually collectively inconsistent propositions:

- a) Propositions exist necessarily, and hence in all possible worlds. (Ch 1, sec 2)
- b) Propositions are essentially assessable for accuracy.
- c) Propositions are assessable for accuracy in virtue of having the function to indicate.
- d) Having the function to indicate is a mind- dependent property.
- e) Propositions are essentially mind- dependent (from b,c,d)

f) Minds are contingent.

g) Propositions exist contingently.

So what should we do? Obviously we could reject thesis a, the idea that propositions exist necessarily. I see nothing wrong with the arguments and motivations given for this conclusion in chapter 1, and have no desire otherwise to reject it without good reason.

We could reject the intentionalist account of function, and thus thesis d. But then we'd have to ask ourselves, what exactly would we want to reject about this theory? It is well-motivated and certainly appears to capture and make clear the ordinary concept of function, and provides a nice account of ordinary cases of functions. We certainly haven't uncovered any good or otherwise well-motivated reason to reject the theory here.

Although there are some minor points to Searle's presentation of it we might want to amend for the sake of clarity (see below), this doesn't really appear to be an acceptable option, either.

Instead, I suggest we reject thesis c, which tells us that propositions possess the feature of being assessable for accuracy in virtue of having the function to indicate. This, anyway, is what entails the problematic theses e and g, the latter of which directly contradicts thesis a. That is, we withdraw our claim that the notion of assessability for accuracy is to be solely understood in terms of the ordinary concept of function, intentionalistically construed or otherwise. Perhaps the ordinary notion of function cannot be expected to apply to things as abstract and unordinary as propositions, since their nature is so radically different from the sorts of things for which we developed the concept of function to apply to. In addition, given that we have good reason to believe

thesis a and that propositions are *essentially* truth-evaluable, we have good reason to believe that propositions are intrinsically truth-evaluable, and hence intrinsically assessable for accuracy, not, as we might have originally thought, as an observer-relative feature.

It might seem that we have yet another alternative to consider in this case, namely, that the basic core notion of a proposition is itself inconsistent, allowing both that propositions exist necessarily and that they are assessable for accuracy in virtue of having the function to indicate. I have no inclination to find this option plausible, though I consider it briefly, and the reasons I reject it below.

*4.2.4. Roots of These Problems.* We have thus far failed to find any acceptable route to a true or even plausible articulation of the thesis that propositions are mind-dependent in any ontologically significant way. The chapter to this point is just a record of failed attempts, and the prospects, at the present, for thinking that proposition ontology can be usefully seen as a minimal ontology on reasons developed to this point for thinking that propositions are mind-dependent looks pretty dim.

The problems encountered in our attempt to understand representational features of propositions in terms of an intentionalist notion of function now seem pretty obvious. Is there any way to avoid these problems, however? It might initially be thought that we could simply eliminate the notion of existential dependence from the intentionalist account of function and replace it with another one, enabling us to renew the claim of propositional mind-dependence. After all, it should by now begin to seem a well-worn point that propositions cannot be, in any sense, existentially mind-dependent, and besides, don't we have a perfectly good notion of dependence – conceptual dependence –

with the help of which we could articulate an alternative notion of function? Perhaps we could simply replace the notion of existential dependence with that of conceptual dependence.

Unfortunately, this seems bound to fail. The notion of a function, or at least that notion as spelled out in an intentionalist way, would seem incoherent without the notion of existential dependence; how could we make sense of agentive functions, which are essentially imposed upon objects, without some sort of existential connection to the sorts of beings who imposed them? Nonagentive functions fare no better. For while such functions need not be imposed (in the above sense) in order to exist, it will seem hard to make sense of them as the sorts of features which are inherently placed within a teleology, when we are talking about them in counterfactual situations devoid of beings possessing purposes, and hence devoid of any teleology in which to place the purportedly functional objects. In other words, our purposes, in so far as they are our own, require our existence (or that of relevantly similar beings), and hence any teleological explanation of the features of a given sort of entity is essentially predicated upon our existence. Whereas the feature in question, the assessability for accuracy of propositions, is an essential feature of things which, by their very nature, exist necessarily, our capacity for intentionality, from which our ability to impart purpose on things, directly or indirectly, is, from what we can tell, contingent. It may not be a contingent feature of *us*; perhaps *we* would not be *us* were we not to have this feature. However, as far as we can tell, the existence of creatures such as ourselves, having the relevant sorts of features we do, is a contingent fact, and so are our purposes. It is our purposes, and hence our

existence, which is required in order to understand the teleological features of things. Conceptual linkages, such as the conceptual dependence of certain essential features of propositions upon our capacities, cannot explain the essential features of propositions, in the way we have been trying to make out, i.e. a sense in which these features are *derived from* our purposes. The analysis (what is to be understood by it, rather than the process or the product of analyzing) of the content of a concept simply does not require our existence in anything like the right sort of way for there to be such a derivation.

But if this point is resisted (say, if it is argued that there is a coherent notion of intentionalist function devoid of existential dependence), we needn't insist, for there is another, perhaps more compelling reason for thinking that even if propositions *are* in fact conceptually dependent upon minds, languages, or both (which, as we will see shortly, they certainly do seem to be, though for reasons entirely independent of the issue of functions), this is irrelevant to our investigation into a possible relation between mind- and language- dependence and minimalism.

##### **5. Accessibility, Expressability, and Conceptual Dependence.**

There's a fairly obvious yet commonly overlooked strategy for establishing a dependence relation between propositions and minds and language, one which can be easily understood in terms of our favored notion of conceptual dependence. As was noted in the previous chapter, propositions are often thought of or described as the contents of our propositional attitudes, or the sorts of things that we strictly speaking believe, doubt, understand, and so on. Let us say, then, that by being the sorts of things that are the contents of these attitudes, propositions are *accessible* to us, or to our minds



(not to be confused with being *assessable* by us in the already explored sense, for accuracy or inaccuracy). This is not to say, of course, that every proposition is so accessible to some existing creature, or even to any possibly existing creature of our kind (“us”), but simply that propositions are, in principle, accessible to some mind or other. An analogous and equally central presupposition to much theorizing is that propositions are the contents of our speech act tokens, or the sorts of things we express and communicate through our use of language. By being the sorts of things that are the contents of our speech acts, then, propositions are also *expressable* by us (in something like a language). Of course, the same sorts of qualifications apply here as with accessibility –by some relevantly similar being in some language or other, not necessarily ours. In fact, these appear to be such central presuppositions to much theorizing utilizing the notion of propositions that we might consider whether it is a conceptual truth that propositions are accessible and expressible, or the sorts of things we believe and express.

*5.1. Accessibility and Conceptual Mind- Dependence.* That propositions are, at least according to the traditional story we usually tell about them, the sorts of things that we believe, doubt, and the lot is orthodox enough not to require argument (though we did the best we could to make it obvious in chapter 1). What more could we say than we already have, though, in support of the thesis that it is a *conceptual truth* that they are? Not much, but there does appear to be some obvious reasons for thinking so, implicit in the discussion of propositions’ accessibility in chapter one. Most discussions involving the notion of a proposition presuppose, in one way or another, that they just are the sorts of things that play this theoretical role (among several others to which this role is closely

related, such as expressability and assessability), and those that do not do so will explicitly introduce propositions by defining or describing them as just these sorts of things. In other words, to reprise a point already made more than once, our concept of a proposition appears to have been wholly (or at least largely) determined by the conceptual and theoretical roles philosophers have introduced the term “proposition” to play. Being accessible, or the sorts of things we believe, just is one of those central theoretical roles.

If it's a conceptual truth that propositions are accessible, then it should be pretty clear that propositions are conceptually mind- dependent. For accessibility, in this context, just means being capable of being accessed by a mind –which clearly involves the notion of mind. Propositions are thus conceptually mind- dependent. Before we move on to examine the ontological significance of this dependence, let's just rehearse how the analogous point can be made about expressability and language- dependence.

*5.2. Expressability and Conceptual Language- Dependence.* That propositions are similarly language- dependent should now be easily seen. It is orthodox that propositions are the sorts of things that can be expressed, and this is largely because propositions were introduced into the theoretical discourse in order to be just those sorts of things. And if this is yet another among the central theoretical roles, it follows that it is a conceptual truth that propositions are expressable. Of course, expressibility here is tied essentially to the notion of a language, for there must be some medium, the means of which we express propositions through, and that, at the very least, is a large part of what we usually mean by ‘language’. This, of course, does not mean that for every proposition there is some expression in an existing language which could be used in some conceivable context, etc.,

etc., which could be used to express it, but merely that each proposition has a possible means of expression, perhaps in languages more lexically or syntactically enriched than those known to us now. So, if it's a conceptual truth that propositions are expressible, it follows that propositions are expressible in a language, or something linguistic in nature, at least, and are thus conceptually language- dependent.

*5.3. Object Horizon and Conceptual Truth.* Unfortunately, the conceptual mind- and language- dependence of propositions turns out to be of no real ontological relevance here, at least not in any way that will encourage us to think that they are at all minimal in the sense that other, paradigmatically minimal entities (including fictional characters and musical works) might be claimed to be. In fact, as we will see, being conceptually dependent on mind or language turns out to be perfectly consistent with being the sort of entities that have been considered paradigmatically non-minimal in nature, things such as ordinary physical objects like mountains and trees. For there are compelling reasons for thinking that rocks and trees are themselves conceptually mind- dependent, and thus that in some sense, conceptual dependence is quite ontologically neutral.

The idea that things like mountains, trees, apples, as so on are in any way mind- dependent may initially strike the ear as controversial or even absurd, though that is most likely because dependence is often assumed to be an inherently ontological issue, which is what I hope to dispel here. In doing so, I will borrow some Husserlian ideas concerning the notion of a horizon. I will here rely primarily on David W. Smith's and Ronald McIntyre's (1982, chapter 5) explication of Husserl's notion. According to them, Husserl attributes to every perceptual experience of an object a *Sinn*, which for our purposes is the way in which the object is characterized in our perception of it. The *Sinn*

of a particular “act” of perception characterizes the object or objects of perception as being thus and so, as when one perceives a ripe Cortland apple, one may perceive it as round, red, fragrant, and so on. But perception is perspectival, which is to say that any single perception of anything like a physical object can only characterize it incompletely; for these objects are, as most of us would assume, transcendent, both having properties independently of our perceptions of them, and, especially concerning physical objects like the apple, possessing properties, such as that of having a backside and a flavor, not represented at all in normal visual perception (1982, 229). Our acts of perception represent these objects *as* transcendent, i.e. they represent objects of perception as having, in an indeterminate or open-ended sense, properties beyond those which are represented in any given perception, which could be perceived in further acts. There is thus a distinction between what is explicitly represented in a given act of perception and what is implicitly represented in this open-ended sense. The latter of these approximates Husserl’s mature notion of horizon.

For our own purposes, we will need to distinguish (as does Husserl) between the horizon of an *act* –the possible further *perceptions* that could be had of the object of the act in order to more fully or completely characterize it, and the horizon of the *object*, which is the possible further determinations of the object (i.e. possible properties the object could have). (Smith & McIntyre 1982, 229; 240; 262) The more useful notion here is that of object-horizon – which is, a bit more precisely, comprised of properties that are not perceived as being possessed by an object in a given act of perception, but are such that they could be. Such a notion is a derivative notion, the properties of an object of perception being derived from the properties given in an “act” of perception, and will be

constrained in some pretty obvious ways in terms of compatibility with that which is originally given in the act, and thus attributed to the object (1982, 263). But more is required in order to properly constrain the contents of an object's horizon than mere logical compatibility. When looking at the apple again, it is, as a matter of mere logic, quite compatible with our perception of it as red, round, and fragrant that the unseen side is composed of pink fabric and that it is stuffed with cotton, but neither of these properties will appear in our horizon of the apple, assuming we do not suffer from some form of mental illness; neither of these is consistent with the fact that the concept "apple" informs our perception of it, that we perceive it *as* an apple. So further, much more detailed constraints are placed upon the horizon of a perceived object than what is given in perception or even what is consistent with what is given in an episode of perception, and these constraints issue largely from the sort of ontological category or categories we perceive the object under—here "apple," which falls under the more general categories of "fruit" and "physical object." (1982, 251)

The way in which the ontological category one perceives a given object under constrains the possible properties in its horizon is something we can understand in terms of conceptual truth; one way of understanding why the horizon of the apple excludes its having one side covered with pink fabric and stuffed with cotton is that it's a conceptual truth that real apples do not naturally occur with these sorts of properties. More specifically, it is a conceptual truth that Cortland apples are real pieces of fruit, and it is a conceptual truth that real pieces of fruit are not composed of cotton and pink fabric. Were one to find an apple-ish object composed of pink fabric and cotton, one would simply not count it as a real apple.

These points about what we might call the perceptual horizon of sensible objects don't seem to help us in dealing with propositions, a paradigm case of nonsensible objects, and we might add that all of this is quite consistent with apples not being, in any way, conceptually mind- dependent. Looking a bit deeper, though, Husserl thought that visual perception is merely one way of *intending* an object (making it the object of one's consciousness, a thing toward which one's mind or consciousness is directed, in the sense of "directed" specific to intentionality). For surely one can also merely think of an apple, and often when one does so, one is thinking about it in one aspect or other, without attending to or even being aware of other aspects or properties. One can intend the apple in just such a way, and in doing so, there remains a distinction between the Sinn of one's apple-intention and the horizon of that episode or "act." When, for instance, one thinks generically of an apple, say by imagining one, its horizon will be quite open with regard to specifics, but part of the horizon will no doubt be that the apple has a look, a feel, a taste, etc., etc., and that it has any number of possible visual or tactile properties. That it does so presupposes that it has some look or other, some feel or other, and so on, and that this is implicit in the horizon of any apple. This is so in virtue of the fact that it is a conceptual truth that an apple is at least a possible object of perception; the concept of an apple is, among other things, the concept of something that can be perceived, a possible object of perception, and this is true quite generally of what are sometimes called ordinary mid-sized physical objects, like trees, houses, and mountains.

What, then, is the significance of this? Well, the notion of perception contains the notion of mind, as it is also a conceptual truth that if  $x$  is perceived by  $y$ , then  $y$  is a mind, or at least the sort of being that has perceptual, and hence mental, capacities—otherwise

we'd not count *y* as the sort of thing that could perceive anything. If the notion of an apple contains the notion of perception, and the notion of perception contains the notion of mind, then it follows that apples, along with most other ordinary mid- sized physical objects are conceptually mind- dependent. But this is ontologically irrelevant; as we will see, apples, trees, and mountains are supposed to be paradigm cases of objects with a non- minimal ontological status, and are the sorts of things allegedly minimal entities (aside from propositions) are contrasted with. If this is the case, then, whatever else turns out to be true of the nature of propositions, nothing whatsoever about their being minimal follows from their being conceptually dependent upon mind or language, and is consistent with their not being so. There appears to be no logical connection between their being the sorts of thing that are conceptually dependent upon mind and/or language and their ontological status one way or another. If we want a reason for thinking that propositions are ontologically minimal (in a sense that has yet to be largely spelled out), we will have to look elsewhere.

## **6. Minimalism and the Determination Thesis.**

*6.1. Determination and/as dependence.* Schiffer's determination thesis (DT), which we will later argue is the central thesis of minimalism and his pleonastic view, tells us that the nature of propositions is determined by our linguistic and conceptual practices, in the sense that it is literally the way in which certain terms and concepts have been introduced and are standardly used, those which purportedly refer to propositions, that determines what the essential features of propositions are. Right off the bat we ought to rule out any direct interpretation of this thesis as straightforwardly entailing that the introduction and

use of the relevant terms literally *creates*, or brings into existence, propositions. Though claims to the effect that propositions are literally created by our conceptual or linguistic practices are apparently sometimes entertained by Schiffer early on,<sup>23</sup>(1994, 305; 1996, 153), and seemingly on the basis of DT, there is no reason to think that he holds that we literally bring propositions into existence by introducing terms for them.<sup>24</sup> DT does not, at least in any obvious way, entail this sort of creation- thesis, and besides, we know that the creation thesis must be false, as it entails false existential dependence claims. In fact, we will see in the following chapter that, considered on its own, DT is both plausible and defensible, and at any rate, we ought to be as charitable as we can if we're to take it seriously. How else, then, might DT be construed as even suggesting that propositions are ontologically dependent upon mind or language?

One may perhaps reason as follows: what it means to say that our practices are determinative of the nature of a given kind of entity, such as propositions, is that, in some sense, what the essential features of entities of that kind are are logically related to the way we use terms that refer to them. A plausible way to understand this relation is that

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<sup>23</sup> I say only apparently because it is certainly not consistent with his current position, and because he showed me (in personal correspondence related to this dissertation) that such a thesis was indeed quite implausible and unmotivated. Nonetheless, the following passages are quite suggestive, especially the second, in which both the determination and creation theses are mentioned almost in the same breath, as though two sides of the same coin:

Perhaps a better response to the something-from-nothing feature is to allow the existence of the entities seemingly miraculously brought into existence by a manner of speaking, but to treat their existence in a suitably deflationary, or minimalist, manner. (1996, 153)

Properties are but the shadows of predicates, propositions the shadows of sentences. To unpack this metaphor, and the sense in which properties and propositions are language- or mind- created, would be to elaborate a sense in which properties and propositions are hypostatizations of our ways of talking about properties and propositions. These things exist alright, and not merely *in* a manner of speaking, but at the same time they exist, somehow, as a result of a manner *of* speaking: they're somehow products of the pleonastic transformations of the something-from-nothing features that earn them a place in our ontology. In a sense, these things are creations of our linguistic and conceptual practices—our ways of introducing referential and quantificational talk of these things—and there is nothing more to their natures than is determined by those practices. (1996, 153)

<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of the section on pleonastic properties in his 2003 book, Schiffer makes the following telling characterization of pleonastic entities in general:

Pleonastic entities are entities whose existence is typically secured by something-from-nothing transformations—'secured' not necessarily in the sense that they are brought in to existence (like fictional entities) but in the sense that their existence *supervenes* on the premises of something-from-nothing transformations. (2003, 61; my italics)



by establishing rules for using the relevant terms we literally make it the case that “proposition” means ‘the sort of thing we refer to in using that- clauses, the sorts of things we believe, etc, etc,’ including all the other sorts of things that we say about propositions, such as their being the objects of propositional attitudes, the ultimate bearers of truth- values, and so on. By introducing these terms and establishing the associated rules of use for them, we (or our ancestors) overtly or covertly initiated a “language game” or linguistic practice that allows us to refer to, or at least to apparently refer to, certain kinds of entities.<sup>25</sup> If, as some might argue, by initiating a language-game in such a manner we can establish existence conditions and identity conditions for the kinds of entities introduced, and it is these sorts of features that we would count as being essential to being an entity of a given kind (such as that of a proposition), then, in a very important sense, it is true that our linguistic and conceptual practices can determine the nature of certain sorts of entities.

6.2. *A use-mention fallacy.* Of course, we will not, on the basis of this reasoning, be tempted to the fallacious conclusion that as a result of terms referring to propositions having been introduced in this way, propositions were somehow miraculously brought into existence, the product of hypostatization or reification.<sup>26</sup> That would obviously run afoul not only of the much belabored point about the existential independence of propositions, but also common sense; one wouldn’t make the same mistake about the introduction of terms for puddles, where nonetheless, this or some similar connection

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Apparently’ here does not express skepticism as regards the existence of propositions, but merely acknowledges the presence of such skepticism. The existence of propositions is not in question at this point in the dissertation.

<sup>26</sup> Though check out footnote 15 for evidence that this thesis has been entertained in print, and also Mark Johnston’s “The End of the Theory of Meaning” (1988, 36), which Schiffer cites as a key inspiration to the development of his pleonastic conception.

may still apply. Nonetheless, there's a very similar and more seductive inference we might make, one that appears to give some sense to the phrase "Language- Created Language- Independent Entity."<sup>27</sup> One may instead say what sounds almost like the same thing, that by introducing terms for propositions and the conventions for using them, we literally *make* it true that propositions have the sorts of essential features they have. The argument would trade on the fact that if we hadn't introduced certain terms, phrases, and the conventions for using them, there would be no convention by which it was true that there are propositions. These conventions would include, as we said above, features such as existence conditions (conditions under which an entity is said to exist), so that it may seem as though we're saying that the truth of the following sentence, "There is a proposition that hand- rolled tobacco is less harmful than factory- made cigarettes, and Mike foolishly believes it," which entails the sentence "There are propositions which Mike foolishly believes," which again implies "There are propositions" depends on our having introduced certain conventions. But these conventions only exist because we introduced them, so the existence of propositions depends on us –specifically, our having introduced the relevant bits of language and conventions. Even if this does not straightforwardly identify determination in the above sense with dependence, it seems to allow us to create an inferential link between the two, so that it follows that entities whose natures are thusly determined are language- dependent.

This too runs afoul of both the already established language- independence of propositions and of common sense, though at first glance there appears to be something to it. Might it force us to revise our views on the language- independence of

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<sup>27</sup> The already mentioned title of Schiffer's 1996 paper in which he develops his pleonastic ontology. The latter phrase gains its sense by the fact that we are assuming that propositions are existentially language-independent.

propositions? Not likely, though because there is some presence in the literature of something like this fallacy (though in a different context, see Sidelle 1992, 284-5; Elder 2004, 20), let's look at exactly why not. Amie Thomasson puts it nicely when she says that

In a world without minds (so the response goes), there would still be gold, it just wouldn't be called 'gold' (since there would be no linguistic conventions); to think otherwise is to make a use-mention mistake. (2007, 65)

In our context, the use-mention mistake takes the form of inferring from a sentence like "The term 'proposition' means 'the sort of thing we express in our linguistic utterances, the sort of thing toward which we direct our propositional attitudes, etc., etc.,' ultimately that propositions are dependent upon us because the convention (that 'proposition' means 'the sort of thing we believe...' etc.) depends upon us, and the truth of the sentence, which (combined with a little empirical data about Mike) implies the existence of propositions. But expressed in such a way, it clearly is a mistake, as it couldn't follow (merely) from the fact that 'proposition' is used in such a way that propositions are dependent on the existence of minds.

## **7. Summary and Conclusions.**

The outline of the argument of this chapter is as follows. There are at least three distinct ways of understanding what we've called naïve dependence claims. Dependence claims can find their philosophical refinement in either of two species of ontological dependence, or in a form of what we've called conceptual dependence. The explicitly ontological notions of dependence (existential and defintional) were found to suffer from some pretty troubling difficulties and/or obscurities that may very well be unrectifiable, at least for the purposes of trying to construe general propositions as mind or language-

dependent. Conceptual dependence, on the other hand, appears to provide us with a manageable framework for making dependence claims in a way that might apply to propositions.

Truth evaluability is both an essential and an intrinsic property of propositions, and is such that the very notion of a proposition contains the notion of truth- evaluability. Anything that is truth- evaluable is assessable for accuracy and inaccuracy, and is thus an indicator. Although it is ordinarily the case that indicators are indicators in virtue of having such a function imposed upon them (thus making the fact that they are indicators existentially mind- dependent), propositions –or at least general propositions, in virtue of their status as necessary existents, would have to be intrinsic indicators, and have this (and the associated features of being intentional, assessable for accuracy) feature in a way that is existentially mind- independent. While propositions do turn out to be conceptually dependent upon both mind and language for some pretty obvious reasons, this in no way implies that propositions are ontologically mind- or language- dependent, as conceptual dependence turns out to be quite ontologically neutral (at least, it doesn't seem to lead plausibly to the idea that propositions are ontologically “minimal” or “deflated”). In addition, the thesis that the nature of propositions is determined by our practices fails to evince of any significant kind of existential dependence for propositions upon those practices. We can find no inherent link between issues of dependence and minimalism, despite the intuition that there might be one.

### **Chapter 3: A Minimalist Account: Propositions as Pleonastic Entities**

*1. Motivations for a minimalist approach to the ontology of propositions.* As we've seen in chapter one, there appear to be good reasons for thinking that there are such things as we've been calling propositions, grounded in what look to be explanatory considerations in the philosophy of logic, language, and mind. But the traditional core of proposition theory, which holds that propositions are abstract, necessary, mind- and language-independent entities (in what I hope I've showed in the previous chapter to be a very significant sense), appears to leave us with some troubling questions and objections about their nature and our epistemic access to them (discussed in chapter one). Such troubles can lead to the feeling that the traditional core of proposition theory is unsatisfactorily incomplete, and that the adoption of what I've called a reductionist approach to the ontology of propositions is the only feasible means of completion. As we've seen, such an approach seeks to reduce the notion of a proposition to other, supposedly more tractable notions, such as that of sets and possible worlds (Stalnaker 1964, 1984), sets of objects and properties (Salmon 1986), or sets of concepts or senses (Frege 1892, 1919). For others, these and other sorts of worries can lead to an outright rejection of the propositional framework for understanding the logical, linguistic, and mental facts, and motivate a search for a completely different framework or set of frameworks (Quine 1951, 1960; Prior 1971).

Recent work on minimalism and pleonastic ontology (Johnston 1988; Horwich 1990; Schiffer 1994, 1996, 2003), however, suggests strategies for dealing with these issues without significant reduction of or deviation from the traditional core of

proposition theory. A minimalist approach to ontology embodies certain sorts of claims about the nature of truth, meaning(s), and propositions which, if correct, would appear to meet many of the foregoing worries head-on. In the recent literature, for instance, we encounter such minimalist or “deflationary” claims as that meaning (and hence propositions –the sorts of things we express in meaningful speech acts) has “no hidden and substantial nature for a theory to uncover” (Johnston 1988, 38), that the identity and individuation conditions for certain sorts of entities, including propositions, are “determined by the canonical concept” we already have for them, and that consequently, there is nothing more to their natures than what is revealed by our implicit understanding of the concepts, as embodied in our ordinary linguistic practices (Schiffer 2003, 66). Furthermore, the purported ontological shallowness of such entities is supposed to point to answers to the traditional epistemological worries about them, by suggesting that they have a very “diminished epistemological status” (Schiffer 1994, 307); we are supposed to be able to know everything there is to know about them a priori, either by reflecting on certain sorts of innocuous and trivial truths about meaning and truth that are held to be constitutive of the notion of a proposition (Johnston, 1988, 38), presumably already known a priori, or merely by reflecting upon our linguistic practices concerning the entities in question, which are supposed to be “determinative of their nature.” (Schiffer, 1996, 308).

Such claims, if correct, would indeed seem to hold forth the promise of a very attractive account of the nature of propositions, and might point the way to solving the problems we are here concerned with. Our goal in this chapter will therefore be to examine and evaluate the feasibility of a minimalist theory of the nature of propositions,

and to see whether such a theory, if defensible, can really deliver the goods by providing the resources to deal with long standing ontological and epistemological worries. Thus far, the only developed minimalist account is Stephen Schiffer's account of propositions as pleonastic (meaning literally 'redundant') entities. As such, nailing down the central claims of and arguments for the pleonastic theory, and a subsequent critical examination, will be our main focus.

2. *Theses central to Schiffer's pleonastic ontology of propositions.* Throughout this chapter we will be referring to the following theses. They are what we will find to be the central claims and commitments of Schiffer's pleonastic ontology, once fully articulated. Most, but not all, of these theses are clearly or explicitly expressed in Schiffer's work, though we will see that those that are not, with some work in a few instances, can be teased from the text, or are clearly entailed or presupposed by what is there. We will not comment on each of them or in any detail in this section, since most of what follows below will consist on doing just that in fine detail.

Schiffer's most general strategy for developing his account of propositional ontology is to articulate a general conception of what he calls "pleonastic" (meaning "redundant") entities generally, which are supposed to be

1. Such that we can know a priori that their existence supervenes on fairly innocuous principles, truths, or facts. (2003, 60)
2. Such that it is a conceptual truth that their existence supervenes on the same sorts of fairly innocuous principles, truths, or facts. (2003, 52-53, 62)

3. Such that their existence is discernable from apparently innocent linguistic practices and valid inferences (called “pleonastic” inferences or “something-from-nothing” language- games). (2003, 60)
- \*4. Such that their natures are determined by our linguistic practices, i.e. by our ordinary or conventional use of purportedly referential singular terms for them. (2003, 59-60, 63)
5. Such that their natures are discernable from the same linguistic practices mentioned in 3 above. (2003, 60)
6. Such that their natures are *fully* discernable or inferable from these linguistic practices, or, in other words, such that what we can infer about the nature of propositions on the basis of these practices is *all there is* to their natures. (2003, 60)
7. Such that their natures are knowable a priori. (2003, 60)
8. Such that admitting their existence somehow avoids the excesses of a certain sort of ontological view about propositions called “Platonism.” (1996, 153)

Thesis 4, the only thesis warranting comments at this stage, is starred because it seems to me the most central and fundamental thesis of Schiffer’s pleonastic ontology, from which many of the other theses literally follow or at least flow.<sup>28</sup> For this reason it is also given its own name: *The Determination Thesis* (henceforth “DT”). What,

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<sup>28</sup> This thesis is also among the most consistently repeated and utilized ideas that Schiffer advances about propositions, though in different places it finds different sorts of expression or wears different clothing. See also Schiffer’s 1994, 308, where he introduces the idea that our (linguistic) practices are “determinative of their (propositions’) nature,” and his 1996, 153-154.



precisely, it and the others may entail about a pleonastic or minimalist ontology of propositions will be the meat of the investigation below.

This may (and perhaps should) strike the reader as a strange and nonstandard sort of ontological view. As I've said, some theses face obvious and seemingly difficult obstacles, while several of the others may simply strike one as initially strange and unclear. Suffice to say these are challenges that must be taken up and addressed here, and it is my primary intention to do so.

3. *Articulating the pleonastic paradigm: fictional entities.* Schiffer's way to theses 1-8 above neither begins nor proceeds through a discussion of or any direct concern with the ontology of propositions. Rather the account begins with a characterization of and follows with arguments for a pleonastic ontology of other sorts of purportedly abstract entities, including properties but focused most centrally on fictional entities such as Sherlock Holmes (of A.C. Doyle's stories), Winston Smith (of Orwell's *1984*), or Buck Mulligan (of Joyce's *Ulysses*). From an analysis of fictional characters and properties Schiffer develops some general principles for determining whether a kind of entity is "pleonastic" in the same sense as these target kinds. He then tries to show that propositions can be shown to exist and have "pleonastic" natures akin to the target kinds by showing that the same general principles apply also to them. We therefore begin our investigation into pleonastic ontology by following Schiffer through the ontology of fiction.

3.1. *Fictional characters.* Embedded in our ways of discussing fiction, it appears that we can distinguish between two significant uses of names and other referring phrases that we can intuitively characterize as names of fictional characters. The first is the common use of such names in telling a fictional story, represented by F below:

F) Winston Smith, his chin nuzzled into his breast in an effort to escape the vile wind, slipped quickly through the glass doors of Victory Mansions...

Schiffer calls this the pretending use of fictional names (2003, 50). It is plausible here to claim that the use of the name "Winston Smith" in such a case is not in any way referential, that anyone (most importantly including the author who first used the name in such a way) engaged in speaking (or writing) thus is merely pretending to refer, and that it is usually clear that he is to be understood as such. A plausible analysis of the semantics of such a use of the sentence can be gotten by assuming that it is implicitly prefixed with something like a story operator, thus avoiding any literal reference to fictional characters (Walton, 1990). The second, more important use (for our purposes), however, would appear to occur essentially outside any such operator, explicit or implicit, and is represented by NF<sup>1&2</sup> below:

NF<sup>1</sup>) Winston Smith is a fictional character.

NF<sup>2</sup>) Winston Smith is a more famous fictional character than Magnus Pym.

Schiffer calls this sort of use the hypostatizing use of fictional names (2003, 51). The key question here is how are we to understand such sentences? In other words, what is the correct way to analyze them, given that they appear to be earnest attempts to say something true, and that it is implausible to analyze them as asserted in the context of a story operator? If they're true in the standard way we take most of our literal utterances

to be true (simplifying enormously), by picking out an existing thing and attributing to it a property that it actually has, we'll have to say that "Winston Smith" actually does refer to something when used in such instances.

Schiffer straightforwardly assumes the tenability of something like the artifactual theory of fiction (Searle 1979, Thomasson 1999, part I),<sup>29</sup> according to which pretending uses of names in fiction can (and often do) literally bring into existence abstract entities like the fictional character Sherlock Holmes by using names in acts of storytelling.<sup>30</sup> According to him, the following inference type is valid:

- 1) Orwell wrote a story in which he used the name "Winston Smith" in the pretending way characteristic of fiction.

thus, 2) Orwell created the fictional character Winston Smith.

The inference from 1 to 2 is an instance of a general inference type, which he calls *something-from-nothing* transformations; every kind of entity that Schiffer calls 'pleonastic' is such that it has instances whose existence is implied by such inferences, this being one of the principle criteria of whether an entity is pleonastic in his sense. Something-from-nothing inferences (henceforward, sfni's) are characterized more generally as follows:

I call valid inferences like that from (1) to (2) *something-from-nothing* transformations since they take one from a statement in which no reference is made to a thing of a certain kind (in this case to a fictional entity) to a statement in which there is a reference to a thing of that kind.

Pleonastic entities are then understood in terms of sfni's:

'Pleonastic' entities are entities whose existence is secured by something-from-nothing

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<sup>29</sup> The Searle (1979) piece is a kind of initial exposition of what's now come to be called the artifactual view. Thomasson's (1999) book is a more detailed and developed recent articulation of the view.

<sup>30</sup> We'll need to keep in mind the sorts of analogies that Schiffer wants to draw (or at least seems committed to drawing) from the case of fictional characters to the case of propositions, not all of which are explicit. Here, the artifactual theory of fiction appears to play the same role for fictional characters as does the face value theory of belief reports for propositions.

transformations (I call these things ‘pleonastic’ entities because something-from-nothing transformations often take us to pleonastic equivalents of the statements from which they are inferred). (2003, 51)

3.2. *Making sense of the way we talk about fiction: Artifactualism.* The artifactual line on the validity of these inferences (simplifying a bit), first introduced by Searle (1979), and developed more recently by Thomasson (1999), is that the application conditions for the term “fictional character” (where these are determined, ideally, by rules for use first established by the introduction of the term into theoretical discourse) determine that we can say that a fictional character N exists just in case someone has pretensefully used “N” in an act of storytelling. Simply put, in the above inference from Doyle’s act of storytelling to the existence of Holmes, the inference is valid because it is enthymematic for an argument involving the premise that the state of affairs represented in 1 (there having been such-and-such an act of storytelling) is all that is required to make 2 true, or in other words, whatever it is that makes 1 true (here, presumably the obtaining of a contingent state of affairs), that and nothing more is required in order to make 2 true. Thus, according to the artifactual view, in addition to the existence of a semantic relationship between 1 and 2, in virtue of which the inference is allowed, we can also say that that the two sentences have something like the same truthmaker or truthmakers, or are made true by the same worldly conditions (something like common sense “facts” – situations in reality, in some sense of that term, i.e. not the same as true propositions). Both 1 and 2 are *made true* by the same situations and objects (i.e. the story’s having been written, the existence of a certain set of speech or inscription- acts). So, in addition to the semantic redundancy, the two sentences are, as we might expect, *metaphysically* or *ontologically* pleonastic, committing us to the same truthmakers. The really important question to address here will be whether there is anything distinctly analogous from the

case of fictional entities to the case of propositions, either semantically or ontologically. But let us stick with fictional entities for the time being.

3.3. *How we discover that pleonastic entities exist.* If there really are such things as the fictional character Winston Smith, which, according to the artifactual line, is an abstract entity, we may begin to wonder how we can have knowledge of them. As we noted in chapter one, this is a central and perennial challenge for any philosopher who posits abstracta. Schiffer attempts to answer this by proposing a type of thought-experiment that is central to his pleonastic-ontological enterprise:

Imagine a possible world  $\beta$  exactly like the actual world,  $\alpha$ , except that no one in  $\beta$  has the concept of a fictional entity, and hence no one has knowledge of the existence of any fictional entities. They have the pretending use in  $\beta$ , and by stipulation, all the fiction that exists in  $\alpha$  exists in  $\beta$ , and therefore every fictional entity that exists in  $\alpha$  also exists in  $\beta$  (for it belongs to our concept of a fictional entity that the existence of such an entity supervenes solely on the pretending use of its name). But while  $\beta$  is heavily populated with fictional entities, no one in  $\beta$  is aware of the existence of any fictional entity. What would it take to bring the people in  $\beta$  up to epistemological snuff with us? What would people in  $\beta$  have to do in order to discover the existence of the fictional entities in their world?

The answer is easy: what they would have to do, and all that they would have to do, would be to play a certain language game—namely, to adopt our hypostatizing use of fictional names. But how can that be? How can adopting a certain linguistic, or conceptual, practice, give one knowledge of things that exist independently of that practice? Because to have the practice is to have the *concept*, and it's a *conceptual truth*—a truth knowable a priori via command of the concept—that the existence of fictional entities supervenes on the pretending use of their names. (2003, 52)

Schiffer's solution to the epistemological problem would thus seem to involve the following theses:

- C1) To engage in a practice of using fictional names like "Sherlock Holmes" in a purportedly referential way in a non-fictional context is to have the concept of a fictional character.
- E1) Conceptual truths about X's are truths that one can know a priori simply by possessing the concept of X's.

E2) It is a conceptual truth about fictional characters (and thus knowable a priori via command of the concept of a fictional character) that fictional characters supervene on the pretending use of their names.

Let's assume here that C1 is alright as it stands. E1 certainly sounds right; if we take the artifactual theory mentioned above to be giving a correct analysis of the concept 'fictional character', (of which E2 is a central part of the analysandum) where a competent command of the concept just means consistently correct usage of the related family of terms according to the rules of use for them, then anyone who has a competent grasp of the concept will be able to know, simply via reflection on the commitments of one's linguistic practice, that Smith and his fictional siblings exist.

E2 is just one way of stating a central tenet of (one version of) the artifactual theory of fiction, and since we're assuming that's at least a plausible theory of fiction, it serves as an explanation of the validity of the *sfni* inferences that lead us to posit fictional characters. E2 specifies the sort of factual conditions that must be met if we are to be licensed to non-pretensefully use a fictional name in a referential way (i.e. a crucial part of the application conditions for "fictional character"), and thus helps us fill out principles 1 and 2 above concerning pleonastic entities generally; it is thus supposed, pace artifactualism, to be a conceptual truth that fictional entities supervene on the use of their names pretensefully in fiction, and hence knowable a priori (simply via reflection on the concept) that a given fictional entity *N* exists just in case "*N*" is used in the right sort of pretenseful way. In other words, in order for there to be a fictional character named "Winston Smith," the world must be a certain way, certain contingent physical and social states of affairs (acts of storytelling, such as the writing of *1984*) must obtain, states of

affairs that one cannot be acquainted with a priori, or in virtue (merely) of concept possession. To clarify then, knowledge of the existence of fictional characters does not and cannot come a priori, though, if one is acquainted with these states of affairs, but lacks the concept of a fictional entity, it would take *no more* than to acquire the concept, and the a priori truths that devolve from it, to be in a position to know that fictional characters exist. Certainly this is a key point of the above thought- experiment, and not without interest. We will see below that this sort of reasoning, when applied to other sorts of entities, such as propositions, that this could have interesting and perhaps even more controversial implications if the premises of sfni's turn out to be themselves knowable a priori.

4. *Concepts central to a pleonastic ontology delineated.* Schiffer provides the following definitions in order to more precisely capture the logic of the central concepts and principles utilized in his ontological program:

Where ' $\Rightarrow$ ' expresses metaphysical entailment,  $S \Rightarrow \exists x Fx$  is a *something-from-nothing F entailment claim* iff (i) its antecedent is metaphysically possible but doesn't logically entail either its consequent or any statement of the form ' $\exists x(x = \alpha)$ ', where ' $\alpha$ ' refers to an  $F$ , and (ii) the concept of an  $F$  is such that if there are  $F$ 's, then  $S \Rightarrow \exists x Fx$ .

A *pleonastic entity* is an entity that falls under a *pleonastic concept*; and a pleonastic concept is the concept of an  $F$  which implies true something-from-nothing  $F$ -entailment claims.

For any theory or sentence  $T$ ,  $T^{\sim F}$  is the theory or sentence that results from restricting each quantifier of  $T$  to things that aren't  $F$ .<sup>31</sup>

CE The concept of an  $F$  implies true something-from-nothing  $F$ -entailment claims—and is therefore a pleonastic concept—iff (i) it implies something from nothing  $F$ -entailment claims, and (ii) for any theory  $T$  and sentence  $S$  expressible in  $T$ , if the theory obtained by adding to  $T^{\sim F}$  the concept of an  $F$ , together with its something-from-nothing  $F$ -entailment claims, logically entails  $S^{\sim F}$ , then  $T^{\sim F}$  entails  $S^{\sim F}$ . (2003, 57).

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<sup>31</sup> By restricting the quantifiers in such a way Schiffer avoids some technical and methodological problems that would otherwise plague the notion of a pleonastic entity. See *The Things we Mean*, 55-56 for a nice list of the problems and how so restricting the quantifiers avoids them.

CE is short for “conservative extension,” the basic idea being that the addition of F’s (such as fictional characters or propositions) to one’s ontology conservatively extends a theory T if the addition of the claim that there are F’s does not disturb the pre-existing causal order in any way (i.e. by entailing further things statable in the purely physical language of T that were not originally part of T before adding F’s.). Schiffer intends CE to be read as a stipulative definition of the notion of a pleonastic concept. The CE requirement is motivated by the desire to avoid the consequence, not explicitly ruled out by any of the previous requirements, that we can simply define anything we like into existence; i.e. that we can, by introducing terms whose application conditions might allow us to infer the existence of entities whose existence might disrupt the pre-existing causal order, make inferences contrary to the observed empirical facts. For instance, consider the concept of a *wishdate*, which Schiffer defines as follows: “*x* is a *wishdate* =df *x* is a person who’s existence supervenes on someone’s wishing for a date, every such wish bringing into existence a person to date.” (Schiffer, 2003, 53) If we were allowed to introduce such a term, we would seemingly be allowed to infer that there are people to date, literally brought into existence by other people wishing they had someone to date. Of course, there’s nothing contradictory or absurd in the notion, it’s just that we know that wishing does not have such a causal power –such entities would be at odds with the empirical data. CE effectively precludes from pleonastic ontology the introduction of any term whose associated conditions of application and coapplication would allow such problematic inferences.

Since the concept of a fictional entity conservatively extends any such theory T (since they are non-causal abstracta), fictional entities are pleonastic entities thus



defined. Based on an analysis of the concept of a fictional entity (assuming the above version of the artifactual theory of fiction) as something which exists whenever certain sorts of speech acts are performed, we have good reason to believe that fictional entities, such as Sherlock Holmes, exist as pleonastic entities, and that we can know of their existence merely by reflecting on otherwise innocent linguistic practices. This, of course, should be no surprise, for as we said above, Schiffer models the notion of a pleonastic entity something like the artifactual line on fictional entities.

A pleonastic ontology is beginning to look as though it can provide some interesting epistemological results; if the theory is correct there are some things we can know about the existence of fictional characters simply in virtue of reflecting on the concept (even if we can't know that they exist *merely* in virtue of such reflections, though, the further sorts of information we require for that, that people tell stories, is in fact pretty commonplace and innocuous).

5. *How we can know the nature of pleonastic entities.* Thus far, I've argued that we have good reasons for thinking that we can easily know that fictional entities exist; the concept of a fictional character is a pleonastic concept, knowledge of the existence of such entities, assuming something like the artifactual theory, comes fairly cheap. But the claims about their existence, and how we know it, are really only half of the story in Schiffer's pleonastic ontology. Equally important are claims about the nature of such entities and how we can know what their natures are like, and we've had little to say about this up to now.

What exactly are we talking about when we distinguish between the existence of something and its nature? Intuitively, questions about the nature of something can be characterized as being about *what* something is rather than *whether* it is. But more will be required to fill out the notion if we want to be able to understand what it means to say, according to Schiffer, that “There is nothing more to the nature of fictional entities than is determined by the hypostatizing language game that deposits them into our ontology,” and further “they have ‘no hidden and substantial nature for a theory to uncover. All we know and all we need to know about [them] in general’ is determined by our hypostatizing use of fictional names.” (2003, 59-60).<sup>32</sup>

*5.1. ‘Natures’ construed as comprised of existence and identity conditions.* A familiar sort of philosophical issue involving the concept of a nature in roughly the sense we will be discussing involve questions about the nature of persons and personal identity in metaphysics; presumably, when we ask such questions, we want to know about certain key or defining features of anything that is a person *qua* person. In particular, when we discuss the nature of an entity or kind in this sense, we want to discuss the nature of a given kind or category of entity in abstraction from features specific to any given individual of that kind. In such a case it seems appropriate to use the phrase “the nature of *F*’s” to refer to what it is we’re trying to study, where “*F*” is a general term that ranges over all possible entities of a given kind (e.g. all possible persons or musical works, or in our present inquiry, all fictional entities or propositions), often called a “sortal” term.

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<sup>32</sup> Schiffer is here quoting Mark Johnston’s line on the nature of linguistic meanings (which turn out to be something very much like propositions) in “The End of the Theory of Meaning”. (1988, 38)

The question we're after at the moment, then, is what sorts of considerations enter into claims about the nature of an entity or entities in this sense?

Claims about the nature of persons, musical works, as well as fictional characters and propositions, can be usefully construed as being about the identity and existence conditions for any possible individual member of that kind (i.e. those conditions under which entities *x* and *y* of a given kind are identical and those conditions under which an entity of the kind exists) (Thomasson 2007, 55-56). We can understand each of these sorts of conditions for a given entity or kind as follows:

***Identity conditions*** for *F*'s are the conditions under which statements asserting an identity between two entities of the same kind or category are true.

“Superman is the *same person* as Clark Kent” is an example of a statement of identity for persons. A *locus classicus* of a theory which can be usefully interpreted as articulating identity conditions is that of Locke's theory of personal identity in the *Essay* (Book II, Chapter 27). There we can take Locke as articulating and arguing for a particular theory about how the phrase “*y* is the same person as *z*” is to be correctly used (i.e. in legal situations), and he is thereby trying to tell us something about the nature of persons (in so far as they concerned legal matters).

***Existence conditions*** for *F*'s are the conditions under which a statement asserting that an *F* exists is true.

In other words, existence conditions are the sorts of conditions that must be fulfilled in order for a judgment or statement of existence (concerning F's) to be correct. We might, for instance, ask whether witches exist, or whether there really are any witches.

Existence conditions for witches are given primarily by articulating the conditions which must be fulfilled for there to be witches. According to the current usage of "the nature of *x*'s," we can articulate the nature of *x*'s by giving the general sorts of identity and existence conditions for entities of that kind.<sup>33</sup>

With this framework firmly in mind, let's now take a closer look at some of the theses delineated in section 3.2. that were supposed to be true of pleonastic entities in general.

*5.2. The determination thesis.* The most fundamental of the above theses concerning the natures of pleonastic entities is thesis 4, or DT. What, precisely, does it mean now, considering the way in which we're construing the term "nature?" What it seems to tell us is that there is a fundamental relation or connection between the way in which certain sorts of apparently referential terms are used and the actual existence and identity conditions for the sorts of entities referred to, that of *determination*. For our present concerns, these include terms used to refer to fictional characters (most centrally, names used non-pretensefully), and those used to refer to propositions (most centrally "that-clauses"). Of course, this is a tricky thesis, and requires a bit of clarification if we do not

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<sup>33</sup> It would of course be a simplification here to say that the nature of fictional entities or persons or propositions is exhausted by identity and existence conditions; for instance questions about what sorts of properties entities of a particular kind can and cannot possess would also certainly fall under questions about their nature as well, in the sense the term "nature" is here being used, and these not may be directly answered by just giving existence & identity conditions for them. Nonetheless, existence & identity conditions seem to be most central and will do the trick for our purposes here.

want it to be dismissed offhand. In order to be charitable, we must not interpret the claim as committing us to the idea that the way in which you or I use such terms actually does much to determine the nature of these sorts of entities. Certainly, you and I use these sorts of terms in the way we do because we inherited them as part of a vocabulary with already associated rules of usage, and nothing you or I actually do with these words determines the natures of the entities we refer to in any significant way. The way in which we learned to use these terms, and the fact that we so inherited them rather than, for instance, stipulatively introducing them (or it having been the case that they were stipulatively introduced in our presence), presupposes that the natures of the sorts of entities we're referring to with them had already been determined, assuming that they were in some way determined, before you or I ever began talking about them. The linguistic practices we adopted presuppose that the terms already have their meaning fixed, and that there already are natures of this type (though not that there actually exists anything having such a nature).

A less troublesome reading of DT would tell us that whenever an entity  $e$  is supposed to be a pleonastic entity, the rules of use for terms referring to  $e$ , where  $e$  is an instance of the kind  $F$  (i.e. fictional character, proposition, etc.) are what determine their natures, where we construe such rules as constitutive of the linguistic practice of using terms for referring to entities of that kind. The basic idea here, defended by Amie Thomasson (see her 2007, chapter 3 for further articulation and defense) is that the rules of use for sortal and kind terms determine the natures of the kinds of entities they refer to, by determining the application conditions (conditions for correct application of terms referring to  $F$ 's) and coapplication conditions (conditions for applying one and the same

referential singular term twice) for terms referring to entities of kind *F*. As a consequence of this, whatever determines the rules of use for referring to e.g. fictional characters and propositions thereby determines their existence and identity conditions, i.e. their natures in precisely the sense of “nature” we’ve been discussing. For instance, we have adopted rules for using terms for referring to fictional characters that determine that it is appropriate to say things like  $NF^1$  above (i.e. “Winston Smith is a fictional character”, thus applying the name “Winston Smith”) just in case the name has been used in the appropriate way in the course of telling a fictional story. This determines the existence conditions for fictional characters. Other rules constitutive of our linguistic practices concerning fiction similarly determine identity conditions for fictional characters.

Now, it is one thing to articulate the thesis in this way, avoiding the most obvious sorts of difficulties, and yet another to claim that it is in fact true of fictional characters, or, what our real concern is here, whether it could be true of propositions. And there are yet other, perhaps even more pressing worries we must address concerning other theses of this kind, no matter what sort of entity we may consider in light of it. But before we address these, we should at least point out how, construed in this way, theses 5 through 7 above seem to follow quite naturally from thesis 4. Thesis 5 tells us now that the natures of fictional characters and propositions can be discovered by reflecting on the linguistic practices of using terms for referring to the purported entities (which includes the something-from-nothing inferences). This seems correct if 4 is, since, on the assumption that one knows how to correctly use the relevant terms or kinds of terms, one need only become a bit more reflectively conscious of one’s use of the terms in order to discern the

rules of usage that guide one to correct use of the them through actual and imagined situations.<sup>34</sup> From there one can hypothetically work out the existence and identity conditions of the sorts of things one is supposed to be referring to. Thesis 6 then tells us no more (and no less) than that any conceivable question we might have about what is essential to the nature of fictional characters or propositions generally can be settled (if at all) by reflecting on the same linguistic practices, i.e. that the rules for using the kind of terms in question will tell us all there is to tell about what is essential to the natures of entities of the kind in question. But this follows only given another supplementary assumption we will have to discuss, namely, that the *only* sort of thing that can be called a determiner of the nature of a given kind of entity is a rule (or set of rules) for using terms referring to them; if the nature of pleonastic entities is thus determined *wholly* by the sorts of constitutive linguistic rules we've been discussing, there could be no further question as to their natures than what could be discerned by linguistic analysis or armchair reflection. Finally, thesis 7 tells us that we can know these natures wholly a priori. Assuming that we are already proficient in the propositional or fictional linguistic practice, and use terms referring to them consistently and accurately, no empirical investigation need be undertaken in order to discover the rules of use for these terms. The ability to correctly use said terms presupposes an implicit knowledge of the rules constitutive of the practices, which can then in principle be made explicit solely by linguistic or conceptual analysis, an a priori method if anything is.

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<sup>34</sup> Of course, what we're saying one "need only" to do in the above can be a notoriously difficult, and sometimes seemingly intractable task, being none other than that of linguistic and conceptual analysis. We all know how difficult this can be especially in hard, borderline, or weird cases. The point is not that this is somehow easy, but that nothing more than this is required for "discovery" of the nature of pleonastic entities. In other words, it's the sort of inquiry that can, in principle, be wholly done from the armchair.

But as we hinted above, if 4 is the sole grounds for thinking 5 through 7 are true of pleonastic entities, anything posing a challenge to 4 would also undermine the proposed support for 5 through 7, and there is at least one obvious worry still facing 4. Why think that the nature of anything is in this way determined by the rules for using terms of the kind in question? Isn't it more likely the case that the nature of the sorts of entities in question were determined by something wholly nonlinguistic in nature (for instance, as we might assume natural kinds are), and that our linguistic practices involving them, and the rules constitutive of them merely *reflect*, rather than determine, the nature of these entities?

Perhaps one reason DT can seem to some an unintuitive thesis has something to do with the fallacy of inferring from the supposition that our linguistic practices determine the existence and identity conditions of certain sorts of entities that individual entities of that kind are therefore language- dependent, which we rooted out and addressed in the last chapter (ch 2 sec. 6.2); if the nature of propositions are, in some sense, determined by our linguistic practices, doesn't that mean that they are dependent on those practices, and hence dependent upon us? But we now know that doesn't follow, so at least some of that prejudice against it ought to have been rationalized away. It is, nonetheless, sort of an odd- sounding thesis, and we'll have to examine it carefully.

*5.2.1. Conceptual truths.* To say that the determination thesis is true with respect to a particular kind of entity is just to say that the truth- conditions for the completions of following sorts of statements are determined by our linguistic practices:

FE) There is an  $x$  such that  $x$  is an  $F$  just in case...

FID) For any  $x$ , where  $x$  is an  $F$ ,  $x$  is identical to  $y$  just in case...



Again, this is not to say that any of our linguistic behavior literally *makes* or *brings it about that* theses about the existence and identity conditions of fictional entities true, since we are merely following along with the accepted conventions concerning the use of names like “Winston Smith” that were introduced to use through familiarity with works of fiction. But neither did our linguistic ancestor’s adoption of such rules have any such creative power. What kind of relation are we asserting to obtain between linguistic behavior about fictional characters and the truth of statements such as the above, then? When discussing DT in chapter 2, we said that we could understand it as asserting that by establishing rules for using the relevant terms (here, terms for referring to and discoursing about fictional characters), we (or our ancestors) established a set of linguistic conventions that license us to say, for instance, that Winston Smith, a fictional character, exists, just in case the name “Winston Smith” is used pretensefully in a work of fiction. If this is correct, this suggests that true ontological claims about the nature of particular kinds of pleonastic entities, such as fictional characters and propositions, can be fruitfully construed as conceptual truths, in exactly the sense of “conceptual truth” we developed in chapter 2 in order to demonstrate that it’s a conceptual truth that propositions are truth-evaluable, accessible, and expressible. This also could account for the thesis that their natures can be discovered by reflecting on the linguistic practices in question.

A distinction we’ve used a few times may now be in need of more precise articulation here, both to help keep us from falling into the already aforementioned fallacy (linking determination and dependence) and to see that theses such as FE and FID are in fact conceptual truths with respect to fictional characters. Since we already have articulated what we mean by “existence & identity conditions,” let’s now distinguish

from these application and co-application conditions for the terms (i.e. “fictional character,” “proposition” –often called “sortal terms”) used to refer to entities of a given kind.

**Application conditions** for sortals are the conditions under which the sortal term (“*F*”) may be correctly applied. Where stateable, these might be stated in something like the following form: “‘*F*’ applies just in case...”<sup>35</sup>

**Co-application conditions** for sortals are the conditions under which a sortal term may be correctly reapplied to the same individual. Where stateable, these might be stated in something like the following form: “[Where ‘*F*’ has been properly applied to an *x*], ‘*F*’ applies to the same *x* again just in case...” (Thomasson, 2007, 55-56)

One distinction to notice here is that claims about the application and coapplication conditions for a given term or set of related terms are *linguistic* theses, about when certain *terms* or *phrases* in a particular language do or do not apply (or reapply), whereas existence and identity conditions are *ontological* theses, and are thus about when an *entity of a particular kind* does or does not exist, and when an entity of a particular kind is or is not identical with what may or may not be another entity of the same kind; in the case of existence and identity conditions generally, the entities need not be linguistic in nature. By keeping in mind this difference between the two kinds of theses, we will avoid precisely the confusion between the *use* of particular kinds of term in ontological theses, and the *mentioning* of them in what are apparently more humble linguistic theses.

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<sup>35</sup> Thomasson (2008), who I’m following quite closely here, does not require that application conditions always be stateable other than disquotationally.

With this distinction firmly in mind, we can now state with greater precision a thesis crucial to establishing DT, with respect to fictional characters in particular, and for pleonastic entities more generally as follows:

*Where “F” is a sortal term, application & coapplication conditions for “F” determine the existence and identity conditions for F’s.*

This can be analyzed more precisely as embodying the following two claims:

- A)** Application conditions for particular sortal terms (“F”) determine the existence conditions for individual F’s, or the conditions under which it is true that there are F’s.
- B)** Coapplication conditions for particular sortal terms (“F”) determine the identity conditions for individual F’s, or the conditions under which it is true that  $x$  is identical to  $y$ .

In other words, what A tells us is that the truth conditions for claims of the following form: i) “F’s exist.”

ii) “There are F’s”

iii) “ $x$  is an F”

are derived from what we’ve been calling the application conditions for sortal terms (“F”). What B tells us is that the truth conditions for claims of the form: “ $x$  is identical to  $y$ ” are derived from what we’ve been calling coapplication conditions for sortal terms.

Again, this is not to say that there is no distinction between what we’ve been calling application and coapplication conditions on one hand, and existence and identity conditions on the other; on the contrary, application and co-application conditions govern language (when a term may be properly (re-) applied) while existence and identity

conditions govern the objects, if any, referred to by those pieces of language.

Nonetheless we can make simple moves of semantic assent and descent from “‘F’ applies” to “there is an F” and from “F co-applies to  $x$  and  $y$ ” to “ $x$  is identical to  $y$ .”

Thus, e.g., the conditions under which “‘F’ applies” and “There is an F” are true are the same (the same goes for claims about co-application conditions being fulfilled and claims about identity).

Of course, it is one thing to say that they have the same truth-conditions, and yet another to say that is the case *because* the linguistic facts determine the ontological facts. Can’t we assume that the linguistic conventions themselves are determined linguistically, either by explicit stipulation, or that a linguistic community gradually and tacitly evolved a particular convention for applying and reapplying sortal terms (Thomasson 2007, 31-32), without insisting that DT is true for pleonastic entities? In the case of ordinary empirical posits, such as trees, mountains, and dogs, as well as with the sorts of entities posited by theories in the natural sciences, it’s reasonable to think that just the reverse is the case; empirical phenomena are observed, the conditions are articulated with some degree of precision, and *then* we adapt our linguistic conventions so as to reflect the conditions in world that give rise to the phenomena, in essence, allowing the world to determine the precise conditions under which the observed object is to be called a ‘tree’ (satisfying the sorts of conditions initially observed when conventions for referring to them were first proposed, whatever they turned out to be), and when we can say that the tree we observed yesterday is the same tree we planted twenty years ago. Couldn’t this also be the case for pleonastic entities?

In the case of fictional characters at least, however, this cannot be the case, as the conventions for referring to them determine that (assuming they do in fact exist) they are non-causal abstracta, and hence not the sorts of things that one could empirically observe, even in principle (if artifactualism is true). True, the conventions we have inherited determine that one can say that a fictional character exists only if certain sorts of worldly conditions obtain, but observing such conditions (records or acts of storytelling) doesn't count as observing a fictional entity. Rather, the force of the convention, once adopted by a linguistic community, is to *establish* the existence and identity conditions for the kind of entity in question. Once the convention is adopted, the existence and identity conditions take on the status of conceptual truths –this is why one can know what the existence and identity conditions are, and can thus know the nature of fictional characters, a priori.

We are now in a position to see that, if artifactualism is true, thesis 6 is also true of fictional characters. In contrast to both ordinary and theoretical empirical posits, there is no further source of information to defer to concerning their natures other than the linguistic conventions which give us the means of referring to them; there is nowhere (or nowhere else) in the physical or social world to which we can look for answers to questions about the nature of these entities, and hence there are no further facts (aside from the constitutive rules for using the terms) *about* their nature.

The case of fictional characters has thus given us a way to understand many theses concerning the nature of pleonastic entities which, taken together, will amount to a form of ontological minimalism about them (Thomasson 2001). If any similar form of

minimalism is true of propositions, we should expect something like each of these theses to be true of them as well.

6. *Propositions.* On the surface of things, propositions appear to find their way into our ontology in way similar to fictional characters. As in the case of our referential use of fictional names, we have inherited linguistic conventions which apparently allow us to refer to and to attribute properties to such things as the proposition that hand-rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory made ones, the most ludicrous thing that Mike believes, and so on, and often enough when we do so we have the intuition that we are saying true things. Perhaps in part as a result of this, we have some very well-known and developed ontologies (discussed briefly at the end of chapter 1) which purport to give a metaphysical account of the nature of these sorts of entities, most of which offer some kind of ontological reduction for propositions (i.e. to sets and possible worlds, or sets of properties and individuals). Each of these theories is a possible, proposition-affirming “explanation” of several interlocking intuitions and motivations, and could at least potentially play a similar role for propositions to that which artifactualism does for fictional entities. But each of these makes sense only assuming the plausibility and power of what we’ve called the “core” of proposition theory. Where any of these rival proposition ontologies offers any significant ontological reduction, we’ve seen there to be significant deviation from the core of intuitions and motivations that led us to consider propositions a possible object of serious ontological study in the first place. We’ve also found each of these rival ontologies to be subject to at least potentially embarrassing questions, in connection with types of metaphysical principles related to Platonism that

seem to be presupposed by their adherents. The promise of a minimalistic or pleonastic ontology of propositions is to provide a superior account to the well-known rivals. What we will now ask is whether propositions turn out to be amenable to any kind minimalist or pleonastic analysis, and if so whether we may be able to avoid any significant deviation from the core and to adopt promising strategies for answering such questions, not open to these rival ontologies.

Propositions certainly look like pleonastic entities in precisely the way we saw Schiffer defining “pleonastic entity” in 3.6 above, in that ‘proposition’ appears to be a pleonastic concept. We appear to be able to infer that propositions exist based on *sfni*’s specific to the concept of a proposition, such as:

3) Dogs bark.

4) The proposition that dogs bark is true.

4 makes the apparent existential commitment to propositions more explicit than other of its equivalents that we could similarly draw, such as “That dogs bark is true” or “It’s true that dogs bark;” so long as we are assuming that propositions exist, we will acquiesce with tradition (and the heap of motivation provided in chapter one) in saying that that-clauses at least appear to be singular terms for referring to them, and thus that there is a genuine commitment there. Since propositions are also supposed to be non-causal abstracta, and their existence, all by themselves (again, limiting our focus to general propositions), implies nothing about the physical world, there is no reason to believe that we cannot restrict the quantifiers of any suitably restricted theory to things that are not propositions in the manner that was proposed for fictional characters. Formally speaking, the concept of a proposition would conservatively extend any such theory (Schiffer 2003,

71). Our interest here lies in seeing whether 1-8, the theses of pleonastic ontology, can be drawn on behalf of propositions on the basis of this fact, and whether this brings us the benefits for proposition ontology we've been promised in the name of minimalism.

The overriding question we should be asking here, then, is whether the sort of *sfni* we've made above really is a valid inference, and if so, what could possibly account for its validity.

### 6.1. *Supervenience explanations of the validity of proposition introducing sfni's.*

Schiffer makes the following characterization of pleonastic entities in general:

Pleonastic entities are entities whose existence is typically secured by something-from-nothing transformations—'secured' not necessarily in the sense that they are brought into existence (like fictional entities) but in the sense that their existence *supervenes* on the premises of something-from-nothing transformations. (2003, 61; my italics).

This appears to be the kind of explanation or account that Schiffer has in mind for the validity of *sfni*'s in general, that the existence of the entities in question bear a supervenience relation to the premises. The trouble is, it's not entirely clear how we should take this claim, when it comes to propositions. The first worry, of course, is the utilization of the concept of supervenience here, a notoriously difficult and inconsistently utilized concept (Kim, 1990).<sup>36</sup> But assuming we can make sense of it here, at least by filling it out in such a way as to make the claim about fictional characters come out plausibly (more on this below), it's not really clear from the get-go what supervenience upon a *premise* would be; are properties claimed to supervene on the content or

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<sup>36</sup> According to Kim, "Because the term is rarely used outside of philosophy, there is not a body of well-established usage in ordinary or scientific language that could generate reliable linguistic intuitions to guide the inquiry: there are few linguistic or conceptual data against which to test one's speculations and hypotheses. This means that for supervenience there are not the usual constraints on the 'analysis' of a concept; in a sense, there is no preexisting concept to be analyzed. ... earlier philosophical uses of the concept do serve some broad constraints on the discussion; however, when it comes to matters of detail, supervenience is going to be pretty much what we say it is." (1990, 541)



proposition expressed by the premise, on the truth of the premise (if we take the key premise to be 1 above, in the case of fictional entities), on the use (tokening) of the premise (if we take the key premise to be something of the kind that F above represents), the state of affairs represented on the premise, or upon something else entirely? It certainly does seem to make a difference which of these we will choose in the case of interpreting any supervenience claim, as was just hinted at in the case of fictional entities. Let us therefore get a bit clearer about the possible interpretations of supervenience claims before moving on.

*6.1.1. Interpreting supervenience claims.* Supervenience claims can be interpreted as involving up to three sorts of relations between two entities  $(x, y)$ , where  $x$  is the supervenient, or supervenes on  $y$ , and  $y$  is subvenient, or subvenes  $x$ : covariance ( $x$  covaries with  $y$ ), dependence ( $x$  depends upon  $y$ ), and irreducibility ( $x$  is not reducible to  $y$ ). (Kim, 1990, 544). In the case of fictional entities, there is certainly grounds for thinking that there is a covariance relation between the pretending use of fictional names and the existence of fictional characters, if we assume the artifactual theory (though not every realist story –certain Platonic theories allow a plenitude of characters of the same nature as Winston Smith or Sherlock Holmes which are never expressed, as, I suspect, do Meinongian theories –though they perhaps do not yet merit the description *fictional* character, in the sense we're using “fiction,” until their names have been used in an actual story) as there is for a relation of existential dependence between the two. This seems adequate to ground the validity of the sorts of sfni's that deposit the notion of fictional characters into our ontology. Do we have anything analogous in the case of propositions and their sfni's?

It's not at all clear that we do. Schiffer's line on propositions begins with a thought- experiment much like that discussed on behalf of fictional characters in 3.3.3.

Imagine a possible world  $\beta$  that's exactly like the actual world  $\alpha$ , except that we in  $\beta$  don't have linguistic practices that license the formation of property or proposition singular terms ('the property of being  $F$ ', 'that  $S$ '); in  $\beta$  we don't play the something-from-nothing language games, and consequently, we in  $\beta$  lack the concepts of properties and propositions and, therefore, are ignorant of the existence of the myriad properties and propositions that in fact exist in  $\beta$  (for it's a consequence of the property- and proposition- introducing language games we play in  $\alpha$ , the actual world, that all the same properties and propositions exist in  $\beta$  as exist in  $\alpha$ ). Consequently, we in  $\beta$  lack all the knowledge we actually have about the existence of properties and propositions. What would it take to bring us in  $\beta$  up to epistemological snuff with us in  $\alpha$ ? It's simple: What we'd need to do, and all that we'd need to do, is adopt the property- and proposition- introducing language games we actually play. (1996, 160-61)

Schiffer's answer to the problem of how we can come to know that propositions, abstract entities we categorically cannot experience and cannot causally interact with in any way, would seem to embody the following theses, each of which are direct analogues of his answer to the same question concerning fictional characters:

- C1\*) To engage in a practice of using singular terms like "(the proposition) that dogs bark" and "what Mike believes" in a purportedly referential way is to have the concept of a proposition.
- E1) Conceptual truths about  $F$ 's are truths that one can know a priori simply by possessing the concept of  $F$ 's.
- E2\*) It is a conceptual truth about propositions (and thus knowable a priori via command of the concept of a property) that propositions supervene on the premises of proposition- introducing something-from-nothing transformations.

C1\* seems no less reasonable than does its analogue concerning concept possession and fictional characters, but for the following point: what we call possessing the concept of propositions may turn out to be more implicit than possessing the concept of a fictional

character. The sorts of linguistic practices, participation in which constitutes possessing the concept of fictional characters, does not usually utilize the term “fictional character,” but it’s plausible that it will seem obvious enough to most people that Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character, and that for anyone who’s familiar with some of the stories and understood the basic fictional intentions of Doyle, this should take on the status of something like a conceptual truth. However, “proposition” is a philosophical term of art far fewer people will be at all familiar with, at least as it enters our present concerns, so that it may not seem quite as obvious to many members of our linguistic community that what Mike believes is a proposition, or that hand-rolled cigarettes... is a proposition, and so on. But the use of that- clauses in such a way as we are concerned with here can be usefully construed as an implicit commitment to the existence of the sorts of things that are believed, that can be true or false, and so on, and statements like “That hand-rolled cigarettes...” is either true or false, is believed/disbelieved, and so on, seem no less like conceptual truths than the fictionality of Sherlock Holmes, so that we will always have some basis for deciding whether a given person can be said to possess the concept of a proposition.

E1 is a principle we have already approved of, and we have no further reason to take issue with it here. Our concern here, then, is to inquire into the truth of E2\* as an explanation of the validity of the so-called proposition-introducing *sfni*’s.

If we’re to take propositions and their *sfni*’s to be strictly analogous to fictional characters in the above sense that they supervene on the premises of *sfni*’s, then it must be the case that the existence of propositions both covaries with and existentially depends upon the *truth* of sentences like 3 above. Does it? Well, according to Schiffer’s account

of the Platonist linguistic practice that deposits terms for propositions into our ontology, the proposition that dogs bark is a necessary existent, existing in every possible world. This means that the existence of the proposition that dogs bark cannot covary with the truth of sentences like 3 above in any ordinary sense of that term, since in any given world the proposition will exist whether or not the sentence is true. This is also sufficient to show that there can be no significant existential (or otherwise ontological) dependence relation between the truth of sentences like 3 and propositions. On the notion of existential dependence (see chapter 2, section 2.1.1 for a discussion of the notion of existential dependence) we investigated in chapter 2, propositions are *independent* of the truth of sentences like 3, since the fact that sentences like 3 are true seems pretty clearly a contingent fact, while the fact that the proposition exists is necessary. There appears to be no ordinary sense in which propositions can be said to supervene on these premises, be it their truth or tokening.

Another look back at the fundamental definitions and stipulations Schiffer provides when articulating the notions of pleonastic concept and entity, however, reveals that there is another, perhaps much more basic sense of ‘supervene’ according to which we might make better and more plausible sense of the idea that the existence of propositions and pleonastic entities generally supervene on the premises of the *sfni*’s by which they and their concepts are introduced (see the beginning of section 4 in the present chapter). If we, following Schiffer’s definition of a *something-from-nothing F entailment claim*, understand supervenience simply as *metaphysical entailment*,<sup>37</sup> i.e.

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<sup>37</sup> Schiffer provides a nice footnote better explaining what he intends metaphysical entailment to be: *A metaphysically entails B* just in case the material conditional  $A \rightarrow B$  is metaphysically necessary. As I understand the notion, metaphysical necessity is that strong form of necessity such that whatever is logically, arithmetically, or conceptually necessary is ipso facto metaphysically

such that the claim that  $F$ 's supervene on  $S$  –a statement, just in case the existence of  $F$ 's is metaphysically entailed by  $S$ , we might get a better understanding of what's going on here.

Following this line, we could simply understand the claim that pleonastic entities, such as fictional characters and propositions, supervene on the premises of their *sfni*'s to mean that they are metaphysically entailed by those premises, no more no less. To what extent this, in any significant way this illuminates the validity of the inferences, however, is questionable, though it's not clear that Schiffer is in any way attempting to, with these notions, propose anything like a satisfying *explanation*, whatever that might turn out to be –I would not feel satisfied here unless I could discover why or in virtue of what there is such a metaphysical entailment, i.e. something that underlies or grounds it. Perhaps it's foolhardy or essentially misguided to look for such an explanation at all. Nonetheless, I will continue to press a bit deeper in hopes of coming up with something illuminating.

*6.1.2. Distinctions among ontologically minimal theories.* Is there any other way to try to ground a (more beefy and less basic) supervenience claim between propositions and the premises of *sfni*'s in question –something that might prove a bit more satisfying?

Thomasson (2001, 323-326) proposes a few distinctions between various sorts of minimalism about abstracta as diverse fictional characters, events, properties, states of affairs, and propositions, which we may find helpful in trying to understand the proposed ontological status of propositions, and which may speak towards the possibility of supervenience and other ontologically interesting claims about propositions. Those, such

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necessary, but something may be metaphysically necessary without being necessary in any of those ways. (2003, 56-57)

as fictional characters, whose existence supervenes on certain sorts of uses of language (e.g. the pretending use of fictional names, and hence the truth of statements like 1 above) are classified as *linguistically* minimal entities; all that is required for their existence is that the relevant bit of language be used in the appropriate way, i.e. in the course of an act of storytelling. Another sort of entity, which includes, at least according to Schiffer's pleonastic ontology, events and states of affairs, are the *relatively* minimal; these are supposed to be minimal relative to the truth of the sorts of sentences which serve as premises in their *sfni*'s. According to Thomasson, what is required for entities of this type to exist is that the original or basic sentence (from which we infer a pleonastic equivalent containing a term purportedly referring to an entity not referred to in the original) be true, an example of which is:

5) Fido bit Fifi.

6) Fido's biting of Fifi occurred.<sup>38</sup>

(Because of the way in which both of these sorts of minimalisms have been defined/described, linguistically minimal entities, such as fictional characters, can also be classed as relatively minimal, since the state of affairs of a fictional use of a name having occurred can be represented in a basic sentence, from which we can infer that a fictional entity exists. Nonetheless, the distinction is a meaningful one, since while the linguistically minimal can be represented as also relatively minimal, the relatively minimal typically cannot be represented as linguistically minimal, as in the above case where we can infer that an event occurred; its existence requires something exclusively extralinguistic. This is never the case with the purely linguistically minimal.)

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<sup>38</sup> The example was first introduced by Schiffer, and then cast in this way by Thomasson.

But as should be clear from our discussion of the motivations leading to the positing of propositions in chapter one, propositions turn out not to be of either of these kinds; any given proposition will exist at a world whether it is in fact expressed in some sentential or linguistic form, and so will neither covary nor be dependent upon either the existence, truth, or use of any bit of language, and since the existence of propositions could be pleonastically inferred from 3's contradictory just as easily:

7) Dogs don't bark.

8) So, that dogs bark is not true.

It is clear that the existence of propositions neither covaries with nor is dependent upon the truth of any given sentence. In fact, given that they are necessary existents, propositions cannot be dependent upon the use or the truth of any sentence whatsoever, and yet are such that their existence can be inferred from the truth, falsity, use, or nonuse of any given sentence. This merely reminds us, in yet another way, that propositions are importantly disanalogous to fictional characters in terms of key aspects of their essential nature.

Propositions turn out to be classified as minimal also by Thomasson, but in a way that's quite distinct from both the linguistically and relatively minimal; they are *absolutely* minimal. Whereas linguistically minimal entities are such that their existence conditions require that certain bits of language are used, and relatively minimal entities are such that they exist if certain sentences are true, absolutely minimal entities are supposed to have null, or trivially fulfilled existence conditions; they are fulfilled no matter which sentences are true or used (and no matter what the facts are, etc.). If this is indeed true of the concept of a proposition, this means that, contrary to Schiffer's general

characterization above, propositions and properties do not have any significant supervenience relation (aside from the more basic claim of metaphysical entailment) to on the premises of their sfni's (or to anything, or that matter). Fictional entities, according to Schiffer's treatment of them, do appear to exhibit some supervenience relation to the premises of their sfni's, but propositions do not and cannot. We must look elsewhere for an explanation of the validity of proposition introducing sfni's.

### *6.2. The conceptual truth explanation of the validity of proposition introducing sfni's*

If we take another look at the sort of thought- experiment that is so central to Schiffer's arguments for a pleonastic ontology of certain sorts of entities, we may find a much more plausible explanation of the validity of proposition sfni's. A study of these suggests that, unlike the case of fictional characters, it is a purely conceptual truth that propositions exist, and hence that the existence of propositions, *unlike* fictional entities, may in fact be knowable *purely* a priori. If we can construct a plausible argument for this idea, we might be a bit further along in understanding Schiffer's pleonastic ontology. What he says in the following passage concerning properties is suggestive, and can perhaps be generalized to propositions.

How can merely engaging in a linguistic, or conceptual, practice give one knowledge of things that exist independently of that practice? Because to engage in the practice is to have the concept of a property, and to have the concept of a property is to know a priori the conceptual truths that devolve from that concept, such as the conceptual truth that every dog has the property of being a dog. (2003, 62)

The implicit argument of the just quoted passage would appear to go as follows:

1. To engage in property talk (i.e. the linguistic practice of utilizing singular terms that purportedly refer to properties) is to have the concept of a property.



2. To have the concept of a property is to know the conceptual truths that devolve from the concept of a property.
3. It is a conceptual truth that every dog has the property of being a dog.
4. So if I engage in property talk, I know that every dog has the property of being a dog. (1,2,3)
5. I engage in property talk.
6. So I know that every dog has the property of being a dog. (4,5)
7. So I know that there is some property, such that every dog has it. (6)
8. So I know that there are properties. (generalization from 7)

This suggests the following argument on behalf of propositions:

1. To engage in proposition talk (the linguistic practice utilizing singular terms that purportedly refer to propositions) is to have the concept of a proposition.
2. To have the concept of a proposition is to know the conceptual truths that devolve from the concept of a proposition.
3. It's a conceptual truth that if dogs bark then it's true that dogs bark, and it's also a conceptual truth that if dogs don't bark, then it's not true that dogs bark.
4. So, if I engage in proposition talk, I know that if dogs bark then it's true that dogs bark, and that if dogs don't bark then it's not true that dogs bark. (1,2,3)
5. I engage in proposition talk.
6. So, I know that if dogs bark then it's true that dogs bark, and that if dogs don't bark then it's not true that dogs bark. (4,5)

7. So I know that there is some proposition, that dogs bark, such that it's either true or not true. (6)
8. So I know that there are propositions. (generalization from 7)

If this second argument demonstrating how we can know that propositions exist is correct, the first 3 theses of pleonastic ontology would be validated on behalf of propositions. Merely possessing the concept of a proposition, which consists in participation in the purportedly referential propositional linguistic practice, gives one the implicit tools for discovering the existence of propositions. Once in possession of the concept, one need only become reflectively conscious of the presence of the apparently referential singular terms for propositions, from which one could easily begin to recognize the theoretical roles such entities play as logical relata, the objects of belief, and so on (see chapter one, section 1.2 -1.3 for one way of drawing this out). One could, in the manner of the above argument, come to acknowledge that we are generally licensed, by the linguistic practice in question, to infer that there is a proposition for every propositional singular term we have the linguistic means to construct, whether or not the proposition in question is actually true (though we'll give reasons for restricting this principle in the final section of this chapter). Since participation in the linguistic practice is all that is required here for this sort of concept possession, any of the rules of use that count as constitutive rules for using the purportedly referential terms would count as a conceptual truths. Premise 3 above represents the employment of just such a constitutive rule –that one may use a singular term purportedly referring to a proposition regardless of whether the proposition is true. Actually, more than this can be gleaned

simply via reflection on the practice, and thereby the conception of a proposition, since that practice appears to license reference to any given proposition regardless of whether it is true or false, believed or expressed, tokened, or even entertained.<sup>39</sup> In other words, this validates the classification by Thomasson (2001, 324) of propositions as absolutely minimal, i.e. having null or trivially fulfilled existence conditions; nothing in particular is required in order for a (general) proposition to exist such that one could successfully refer to it. From this it follows that it is a conceptual truth that propositions supervene on something rather innocuous, validating the second principle I articulated of pleonastic ontology. In addition, in the case of propositions, since we can infer the existence of propositions –or at least general propositions, in the manner just adumbrated with a conceptual truth as a *sfni* premise, it also follows that it is a conceptual truth that propositions themselves exist –one may infer, for at least many propositions,<sup>40</sup> that a given proposition exists, and therefore that there are propositions, from anything or nothing. And given, then, that conceptual truths are such that one may come to know them a priori, thesis 3 concerning pleonastic entities is also validated for propositions, since one could then know that they existed a priori via reflection on linguistic rules that are constitutive of the practice (thesis 3).

*6.3. Knowing the nature of propositions.* As we've seen, the theses central to pleonastic ontology can be usefully divided into two groups; theses 1-3 concern how we come to

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<sup>39</sup> This echoes and confirms important points made by Carnap about the mind- and language- independence of propositions and the propositional framework in "Empiricism, Semantics, Ontology", 1956, 16.

<sup>40</sup> As I have before, I feel disposed to qualify this claim with the theoretical possibility that singular, as opposed to general propositions, are contingently existing entities, existing only if their referents do. However, I find the possibility of *any* propositions being, pace the pleonastic view, knowable a priori via conceptual truths so interesting and relevant that I am, and will, for the most part, focus on them in what follows.

know that there are entities of a given kind (propositions, fictional characters, etc.) that fall under a pleonastic concept, and theses 4-7 represent the minimalist strategy for explaining how we can come to know the natures of pleonastic entities. We argued above that thesis 4 (DT) is the central thesis of pleonastic ontology, and that if it is true of a given entity in the sense that a) our linguistic behavior wholly determines the application and co-application conditions for terms referring to entities of that kind, and b) these conditions in turn determine the existence and identity conditions for entities of the kind the terms are purported to refer to, theses 5-7 follow. All we need establish now, then, is that DT is true of propositions. In the case of fictional characters, we said that DT was true if there is nothing in the world independent of our linguistic behavior that determines the linguistic conventions in question, as is plausibly the case with trees and volcanoes. This claim, however, was motivated independently of minimalism and confirmed by the artifactual theory of fiction, which tells us that Winston Smith, Sherlock Holmes and the like are linguistic artifacts, literally brought into existence by speech acts of storytelling. Whether or not this is in fact a true theory is not our concern; what its presence here tells us is that in the case of propositions we should look for a plausible theory which can tell us something about their nature, one which confirms or is at least consistent with the sorts of claims issued about them on the pleonastic theory.

One suggestion here is that what we've to this point called the "core" of proposition theory discussed in chapter 1 can play just the same role in our evaluation of a pleonastic ontology of propositions as did the artifactual theory in our discussions of a pleonastic ontology of fiction. The "core" of so-called "explanatory" arguments discussed in chapter 1 taken at face value, can serve as a basis from which to infer certain

things about the nature of propositions, as we have in concluding that if propositions are the objects of our attitudes, the fundamental bearers of truth values, and so on, that they are abstract, mind- and language- independent, and so on.

Does the ontological picture offered by the “core” confirm the pleonastic theory’s endorsement of thesis 4 on behalf of propositions? The core tells us that we can infer that propositions must be entirely non- empirical abstracta, so that there is nothing we could experience, such as natural or social phenomena, that would count as experiencing or causally interacting with a proposition. In other words, there is nothing we could experience in the natural or social world that could serve as the analogue of experiencing a volcanic eruption such that we could say that it serves as a language- independent phenomenon to which we have adapted our linguistic conventions for talking about propositions, and therefore nothing aside from our linguistic decisions that could be said to determine our conventions aside from the fact that they serve some collective purpose or purposes. Further, the core tells us that propositions must be necessary existents, each existing in every possible world. This also confirms what the pleonastic account implies about propositions (or, at least, following the qualification made in chapter 1, and again in footnote 40, general propositions) being, in Thomasson’s classification, absolutely minimal, having null or trivially fulfilled existence conditions. This, of course, must then be another important dimension of difference between general propositions and fictional characters on the minimalist view, since fictional characters have existence conditions which are not trivially satisfied. This should serve to remind us that the core insight of minimalist ontology is not that propositions, fictional characters, properties, and whatever else are amenable to the minimalist treatment are somehow supervenient entities, but that

the important truths about their natures are conceptual truths, which shows that these entities are really quite epistemologically shallow.

*6.4. Platonism about general propositions.* As we saw in chapter one, one of the benefits Schiffer aims to secure for his pleonastic theory of propositions, is its ability to avoid what Schiffer calls “heavy-duty Platonism”, reflected in theses P1 through P3 (Ch 1, sec. 3.4). For convenience sake, I’ll simply repeat them here:

**P1** Nothing we do or could say or think actually does or could in any way or bring such entities into existence, or make it the case that they exist.

**P2** In order to discover the nature of such entities, some sort of substantially non-linguistic and non-conceptual investigation of the world is required, i.e. the natures of such entities could not simply be read off our linguistic or conceptual practices.

**P3** In order to discover that such entities exist, some sort of substantially non-linguistic and non-conceptual investigation of the world is required.

After our forays into the various sorts of ontological dependence relations in chapter 2, it should be pretty clear that P1 is a correct principle with regards to propositions on the minimalist account. At the same time, the problems associated with what Schiffer called “Heavy-Duty Platonism” don’t really originate from this feature of propositions, pleonastic or otherwise, and this appears to be a true principle with regards to each of the different accounts considered. It shouldn’t be too hard, at this point, to see

why this is a seemingly essential principle of any proposition theory; it is fundamental part of the core of traditional proposition theory that they are necessary existents, which is a further consequence of propositions' theoretical role as truth bearers (having truth conditions in every possible world), and in their absolute independence of empirical facts.

If there are problems associated with the heavy-duty Platonism described by Schiffer, they seem to be rooted in P2 and P3. As I noted in chapter 1, the basic Fregean ontology of propositions, as it stands, looks most vulnerable to Platonistic worries, open as it is to questions about how we come to know the nature of propositions if not by linguistic and conceptual analysis, and how we come to know that such entities, whatever they are, exist. The Fregean does not seem to have, all by himself, the resources for answering these sorts of questions, and thus leaves some of the most fundamental aspects of our ontological inquiry mired in mystery –or at least why we should think that the Fregean is right.

But again, while basic Fregeanism seems most likely to be charged with the worries of this sort of Platonism, what I have called reductionists about propositions, represented by Neo-Russellians like Salmon and possible worlds theorists like Stalnaker, don't really escape some of the worries associated with Platonism. For while each provides a more detailed picture of what the nature of propositions is on their view –what I previously called theories of their *extended* natures, and thus provides possible resources for questions that bother possible critics of the Platonist about how propositions might actually be able to play the theoretical roles assigned to them by the core, and about how propositions fit into a more general ontology, P2 and P3 also appear true of these ontologies as well. In fact, it appears as if a result of the further detail they provide,

they are open to further and more potentially embarrassing questions. How, for instance, are we to know that propositions have the extended natures postulated by any given reductionist story of their natures? How are we to know that entities of these particular natures exist? How are we to adjudicate among the rival ontological pictures they present for us? As I will argue in the following chapter, among the more troubling observations about the notion of a proposition is its seeming hypostatized status as merely the reflection of our apparent theoretical needs and linguistic practices concerning meaning, truth, attitudes, and so on. Given this, one begins to wonder how we could possibly have or justify the sorts of answers that reductionists offer us about the nature of propositions aside from the conceptual and linguistic inquiries we've carried out in the name of minimalism, as the extended natures they offer for us go beyond what we can conclude on the basis of linguistic and conceptual analysis. Given, again, that propositions, non-causal and non-empirical abstracta, are not the sorts of things we can empirically discover or investigate, and for lack of another, non-conceptual mode of inquiry by which we might hope to answer such questions, we might begin to wonder even whether such there is a further nature to these entities other than what we can minimally conclude on the basis of armchair reflection.

How, then, does the minimalist or pleonastic line advocated by Schiffer fare in comparison? In so far as we have reason to believe that theses 3 and 5 are true of propositions, we have reason to believe that P3 is a mistaken view about propositions. P2 is the contradictory of DT, which we've found to be quite reasonable about propositions, thus minimalism appears to escape unscathed from the problems associated with heavy-duty Platonism. And again, it's worthwhile to rehearse the reasons we have for thinking



that we ought to avoid heavy-duty Platonism about propositions, aside from the positive reasons provided in support of the minimalist story. If propositions are entirely non-causal abstracta, and such that they are necessary existents with null existence conditions, then there is no possible evidential base in experience from which we could come to discover their existence, and equally no possible experiential means from which we could discover that they have the natures they have. One begins to wonder, then, what, aside from becoming reflectively conscious of one's talk of propositions, could possibly serve as the basis for such discoveries. In other words, Platonisms of the above kinds serve to make more plain not only that there are serious and justifiable epistemological worries about propositions, but seem to remove any means of demystifying any purported knowledge of and about propositions.

Minimalism, as exemplified in Schiffer's pleonastic ontology of propositions, on the other hand, provides the means to avoid these worries, and thus seems to dissolve at least some of the more troubling worries that plague the traditional ontology of propositions, though as we will see in the following chapter, if the general thrust of minimalism is correct in this regard, these apparent virtues do not come without cost for the theoretical relevance of proposition theory. As I will argue, on the minimalist view about propositions we can show that propositions can indeed play the theoretical roles that the notion of a proposition is designed to play—confirming their status as pseudo-explanatory entities, the sorts of things that we believe, mean, communicate, and so on, but on a level of triviality that might call into doubt the potential explanatory relevance of proposition theory construed, most fundamentally, as the thesis that propositions do in fact exist.

*6.5. The real benefits of pleonastic ontology.* Principal worries we expressed about propositions in chapter 1 concerned primarily two distinct but related sets of issues: epistemological issues about how we could know of and about them, and issues about their purported explanatory roles, or the explanatory value of theories which posit them. We can now see that the principal benefits of a pleonastic ontology of propositions is that it can plausibly and comprehensively answer the epistemological worries. Theses 1-7, which we've provisionally argued to be true of propositions, can be clearly used to explain how becoming reflectively conscious of certain aspects of our linguistic practices can give us all the epistemic access to propositions that we could ever want or need, thereby dissolving the epistemological worries. This also serves to partially allay one worry associated with the accusation that propositions are merely hypostatizations or reifications, namely whether we are justified in taking the way we talk to be indicative of what exists.

Nonetheless, pleonastic ontology would seem to do nothing, all by itself, to allay the second sort of worries about the explanatory roles of propositions, and would indeed seem to exacerbate them. For if propositions are really as "thin and inconsequential" as the Schiffer says they are, one might wonder how theories which posit them could play any meaningful explanatory role. But before we address that issue in the next chapter, there is a more pressing worry we need to address concerning the possibility of a pleonastic ontology more generally.

7. *Kantian worries.* Possibly the most serious, and to many, the most obvious objection to minimalism about propositions concerns theses 1 and 2 from section 3.2 –not generally of course, but specifically as they play out for the ontological and epistemological status of propositions. Again, they tell us that we can know that propositions exist a priori (1), and this existential knowledge is made possible by the fact that it is a conceptual truth that they exist (2). But how could it be a conceptual truth that anything exists, and how could something be such that we could know that it exists merely in virtue of examining our concepts? Don't the minimalist implications of 1 and 2 for propositions run directly counter to long held and widely esteemed ontological principles, perhaps first made explicit by Kant? Schiffer acknowledges the problem citing Hartry Field:

Maybe you feel like reading Kant to me. For Kant, in response to the ontological argument for the existence of God, famously held that 'existence isn't a predicate', where by this he meant that no mere concept, however defined, can secure that there exist things that fall under the concept. Hartry Field, endorsing Kant's point, has succinctly restated it thus: 'An investigation of conceptual linkages can reveal conditions that things must satisfy if they are to fall under our concepts; but it can't yield that there are things that satisfy those concepts (as Kant pointed out in his critique of the ontological argument for the existence of God).' (2003, 52)

Thomasson (2007, 159) also acknowledges the same point when discussing minimalist positions (though not directly concerning propositions), citing Stephen Yablo and Theodore Sider:

It is often—aptly enough—remarked that our definitions do not make it the case that anything exists; as Stephen Yablo says, “the knock against this has been the same ever since Kant; from the conditions a thing would have to satisfy to be X, nothing existential follows, unless you have reason to think that the conditions are in fact satisfied” (2002, 221). Similarly, Theodore Sider notes that while “I am free to stipulate any necessary and sufficient conditions for falling under the extension of ‘keyboard’ that I like, no such stipulation can guarantee that there is something satisfying those conditions.” (2001b, xix)

We seem to have inherited in the notion of a proposition a concept which has been implicitly defined in such a way as to guarantee that something falls under it.

Propositions have been argued to have trivially fulfilled existence conditions, which means that they (or at least some of them, as general propositions seem to do) exist *no*

*matter what*, so to speak. But isn't this exactly what Kant, in diagnosing the deficiencies in the ontological argument, persuasively diagnosed as an illegitimate move? Despite the fact that we may not have defined or introduced it in this way, isn't it still a flaw that removes any plausibility from the pleonastic conception of propositions?

The minimalist line on propositions is, of course, a direct challenge to the Kantian principle articulated in the above passages, and thus must show that the principle either is mistaken or does not apply in the case of propositions. So let's first consider a case where something like the Kantian principle is obviously relevant, for instance, in Schiffer's wishdate example. We know that there are no wishdates, and we could not legitimately use the definition of a wishdate, as given above, to argue that there are such things. But recall that there are resources from within minimalism for saying why this is so independently of the Kantian principle: the concept of a proposition does, whereas the concept of a wishdate does not, conservatively extend any theory that you can add it to. To re-emphasize the problem with the notion of wishdate, anything falling under that concept would disturb the pre-existing causal order. Of course, you can't disturb the pre-existing causal order merely by introducing a concept and defining it in such a way as to ensure that something falls under it, where that something would disturb the pre-existing causal order. But we're not doing this in the case of propositions. To put the problem with any such wishdate argument in yet another way, the bringing into existence of dates would disturb the pre-existing causal order, so there's good reason to believe we'd otherwise find out about it, and despite the way in which wishdates have been defined, we've discovered no such thing. Propositions, however, pass CE and therefore

we have no reason to believe that we'd ever find out about their existence from any source other than our linguistic practices.

Schiffer seems to make essentially the same point when he tells us that propositions have no algorithm for elimination:

Some terms have “algorithms for elimination” built into them. For example, we learn that there are no witches when we learn that no women have certain causal powers, and we learn that there is no phlogiston when we learn that no substance is given off in burning. But what algorithms for elimination do properties or propositions have? Our linguistic and conceptual practices give bases for asserting sentences that ostensibly entail reference to properties and propositions, but these practices give us nothing like an algorithm for elimination. (1996, 152)

In other words, there's no conceivable or even possible experience that anyone could have such that, once they have the concept of a property and/or a (general) proposition, it should lead them to stop believing that there are such things, and hence to stop applying terms for referring to these entities. Just the opposite is true of wishdates, and perhaps we can say that also, for instance, of the sort of being Anselm appears to have been trying to establish by his ontological arguments. If “God” is defined as the greatest possible being, that being will also, in virtue of being so defined, not only be necessarily existing, but also presumably be a 3-O being (Omnipotent, Omniscient, Omnibenevolent). But a 3-O being must also, qua 3-O being, have causal powers (in virtue of its omnipotence) and propositional attitudes (in virtue of its omniscience), which should clue us in to the fact that the concept of such a being would, like the concept of a wishdate, not conservatively extend any theory to which it was added. What this suggests is that for any concept that does not pass CE, we cannot get *merely* conceptual proofs of the existence of anything falling under that concept. But again, propositions pass CE, and so we've no right to demand that discovering them requires anything other than a conceptual investigation.

8. *More bad company?* But as recent work into the methodological presuppositions of ontologies like that of the purported minimalist has shown, the above sorts of quantifier restrictions and conservative extension requirements simply do not, by themselves eliminate all worries along these lines. The CE requirement helps avoid flat out inconsistency with the empirical facts, and the quantifier restrictions preclude the possibility of being committed to inconsistencies, but other sorts of troubling logical problems, such as contradiction and apparent ontological indeterminacy still loom for the minimalist if he continues to do business as we've seen him doing, by simply determining (or stipulating) the application & coapplication conditions associated with a given sortal and checking to see if they are fulfilled (or, as in the case of propositions, determining that no substantial conditions need be fulfilled).

For instance, consider Matti Eklund's (2006) xhearts/xlivers objection; suppose we introduce two terms, "xheart" and "xliver," where an xheart is defined as something indistinguishable from ordinary hearts except they exist only if xlivers do not, and xlivers are defined as being indistinguishable from ordinary livers except they exist only if xhearts do not (2006, 112-113). It would certainly appear that xhearts exist, since they are indistinguishable from ordinary hearts, which clearly exist, but then it would also appear that xlivers exist since they are indistinguishable from ordinary livers; but if one sort exists, the other does not and vice versa. We thus have a rather unappealing indeterminacy: either xhearts exist or xlivers do, but not both, but there is no objective criteria available to allow us to decide which, if either, of these sorts things exist, thus the claim of ontological indeterminacy.

Anyone conducting their ontological business in such a way must find a way to avoid these and like problems.<sup>41</sup> In response to these and other sorts of potential objections and counterexamples, Thomasson<sup>42</sup> (unpublished manuscript entitled “Ontology Made Easy,” but see also Hale and Wright, 2001, 132-37) proposes the following more comprehensive set of constraints for introducing new *sortal* terms (or simply revising already existing but problematic *sortals*):

1. Generality: terms must come with sufficiently developed application and co-application conditions to make the terms usable/projectible.
2. Consistency: The conditions for application and co-application of each term must be consistent.
3. Conservativeness: The term must be defined in such a way that it not introduce fresh commitments which are expressible using singular and *sortal* terms of the language as it was prior to the introduction of its *definiendum*.
4. Well-introducedness: Terms must be well-introduced in the sense of either
  - a. being a basic *sortal* (not introduced via definition in other terms)
  - b. being introduced via sufficient conditions for their application which are introduced only in terms of well-introduced *sortals*, or
  - c. where several terms are introduced together and interdefinedly, we may count this as a single act of definition and require that this collective definition meets the previously stated criteria (of generality,

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<sup>41</sup> Thomasson (*unpublished manuscript*) “Ontology Made Easy,” conducts a very helpful discussion of two deflationist conceptions (“Neo-Fregeanism” and her own “Semanticism”) of how to answer existence and other ontological questions.

<sup>42</sup> Hale and Wright (2001, 132-37) had earlier introduced quite similar constraints, including conservativeness, generality, consistency, and harmony (which would be the analogue of Thomasson’s “well-introducedness”). Thomasson’s constraints are slightly more specific in that she poses these as constraints on introducing new *sortal* terms. I prefer this because I have been taking “proposition” to be a *sortal* term.

consistency, and conservativeness). (Thomasson, “Ontology Made Easy”)

In relation to the constraints Schiffer adopts, the quantifier restrictions would serve the ends of consistency, which would also serve to preclude formation of the set-theoretic paradoxes, and CE is of course represented under 3. The further constraint that the sortal term or terms be well-introduced nicely helps us avoid the sort of indeterminacy that Eklund’s xhearts/xlivers example threatens (4.c.) We should, however, say along with Thomasson that there is no guarantee that this set of requirements is complete; further counterexamples could be generated down the road, some of which might encourage further constraints—a caveat that Schiffer earlier acknowledged as well after proposing his stipulated definition of pleonastic entities, which involved the CE requirement. (2003, 60-61) This should at least serve our present purposes.

At this point, a minimal or Pleonastic ontology may begin to look quite attractive. Schiffer’s pleonastic ontology provides us with a distinctively minimalist theory not only of the nature of propositions, but also the resources for backing up our claims about the nature of propositions and those in which we commit ourselves to their existence. Ultimately, these claims are rooted in the sorts of conceptual connections and dependencies that I tried to clarify in chapter two, though they proved to be independent of the sorts of ontological dependencies I was principally investigating there. I have drawn, as a result, some promising results concerning how we come to know of and about propositions, which was earlier noted to be among the chief worries about proposition theory. The minimalist view thus seems to enjoy a wealth of argument, in so far as we found support for theses 1-7 of pleonastic ontology with respect to propositions,



and appears to avoid some of the most serious problems associated with traditional proposition ontologies, as instanced in the Fregean and reductionist views. Nonetheless, there remain serious problems for the minimalist about propositions to grapple with, concerning the capacity of “thin and inconsequential” minimalist propositions to play a genuine explanatory role, and provide any substance to the “core” of motivations and theoretical roles reviewed in chapter one. In the next chapter, I address the issue of the explanatory relevance of propositions and what resources the minimalist has at his disposal. There I will try to say what the minimalist line on this and related issues, completing my survey and evaluation of the theory.

## Chapter 4: What Proposition Talk is Good For.

*1. Propositions and explanation: Re-examining our motivations.* In the previous chapter, we gave Schiffer's minimalist account of propositions a thorough examination, and found it for the most part plausible, well motivated, and defensible. This is good news, as central worries that have dogged propositionals seem to be put to rest by becoming a minimalist. General propositions are a unique breed of pleonastic entities, the sorts of things whose existence we can trivially infer the existence of, and such that what is essential to their natures seem incapable of outrunning what we can infer on the basis of armchair reflection on our proposition- affirming linguistic practices. We can thus know that they exist, and all there is to know about them as a kind generally, wholly a priori.<sup>43</sup> A minimalist account seems to give philosophers who refer to propositions in their analyses and theorizing a good deal to be happy about. We can now go about utilizing proposition talk –the existentially committing linguistic practices utilizing referential terms for referring to propositions, as we and our predecessors have, but now with a bit less anxiety; claims to the effect that what we are doing when so talking is somehow mysterious or epistemologically unfounded now seem to be the sorts of claims we can meet with confidence. This is no small matter, as we saw that a major sticking point for critics of proposition theory (and that of abstracta generally), and the linguistic practices

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<sup>43</sup> As mentioned in previous footnotes, I am very sympathetic to the view that singular propositions are dependent upon their contingent referents, and hence are themselves contingent. If this is the case, contra the traditional view, their existence cannot be known a priori, though it seems to me that the inference that such and such a singular proposition exists, is nonetheless a trivial inference assuming other sorts of easily decidable facts. For instance, if I know that Martin Brodeur exists, I can trivially infer that there is a proposition that Martin Brodeur has won the Vezina, and just as easily that there is a proposition that he has not won the Vezina. Though some work would have to be done to work out the precise form of the inferences or transformations, it seems the existence of such propositions easily fits into a Pleonastic ontology, and that they pass the conservative extension criterion, as well as the other constraints provided at the end of the previous chapter.

it attempts to analyze and endorse, was that their being abstract, necessary, non-empirical entities put them beyond our epistemological access, and seemed to make it a mystery how we could ever come to know, for instance, that there was a such a thing as the proposition that snow is white, which is what both Pete and Pierre believe.

*1.2. Minimalism and “the core.”* Moreover, the propositions that the minimalist gives us, despite their ontological shallowness, appear to do just about all we originally wanted them to do for us –they are indeed the contents of our attitudes and linguistic utterances, the sorts of things among which relations such as contradiction and implication obtain, and much else besides. We can see this by considering something-from-nothing transformations such as license us to infer the existence of propositions that the minimalist has given us a deflationary ontology of, as in the following instances:

- 1) Mike believes that hand- rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory- made ones.
- 2) So, there is something that Mike believes, namely, (the proposition) that hand- rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory- made ones.
- 3) Mike said that hand- rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory- made ones.
- 4) So, there is something that Mike expressed in saying that, namely, (the proposition) that hand- rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory- made ones.

- 5) What Mike is reported to have said in 3 above is false.
- 6) So, there is something that is false, namely, what Mike is reported to have said, namely, (the proposition) that hand-rolled cigarettes are less harmful than factory-made ones.

Each of the above inferences respectively motivates us to consider a relational account of belief, and a commitment to propositions (as opposed to sentence tokens and types, belief states –see chapter 1, section 1.2.1 and *passim* for more on motivations for taking proposition theory seriously), as the objects of our attitudes (1-2), the expressed contents of our utterances (3-4), and as truth-bearers (5-6). Each does so as a result of something-from-nothing inferences characteristic of our proposition talk, and persuasively analyzed by the minimalist type of ontology discussed in the previous chapter. From this it should be clear how inferences of this type can be given to show that all of the core theoretical roles discussed in chapter one fall out of the linguistic practices that the minimalist claims are constitutive of our concept of a proposition. What we called the “core,” the set of motivations central to a serious consideration of proposition theory generally, appears to be validated.

*1.3. The question of relevance: pressing explanatory worries.* There is, however, an important sense in which pleonastic propositions appear to disappoint our expectations from chapter one. A central, if perhaps vague, motivation for positing propositions was the apparent *explanatory power* of doing so; i.e. by committing ourselves to abstract propositions, we said, we seem to be able to *explain* or *account for* various sorts of

purported facts about linguistic meaning, belief, and what have you. In fact, this is no minor point, for as we saw, a central argument for the existence of propositions would have us infer from the apparent explanatory power of proposition theory that it is substantially true, i.e. that propositions, conceived as the sorts of things capable of playing just those theoretical roles, do in fact exist. In fact the main argument form we considered, which would essentially have us posit propositions as explanatory entities, seems to be the take-off point for each of the competing ontologies and conceptions of propositions we considered in chapter one. If the minimalist is correct, however, and despite the fact that his minimalized or deflated propositions are just the sorts of things that play the assigned theoretical roles and satisfy the core motivations of proposition theory, this sort of argument for the existence of propositions seems superfluous; so-called explanatory reasons for positing propositions are obviated entirely if we can know that propositions exist simply by reflecting on the concept of a proposition.

Unfortunately that is not the worst of it for the minimalist. Not only do the explanatory considerations, once so central to the propositional enterprise, appear superfluous in arguing for their existence, but there is good reason to worry about whether these considerations could ever have really done the so-called “explanatory” work that they were supposed to. Before we see why, however, perhaps we ought to remind ourselves why the question of the explanatory status of propositions or proposition theory still seems not only relevant but pressing. Most of the problems left over from the previous chapters originate in reasonable doubts about the possibility of propositions playing any genuine explanatory role.

First, there is a worry about the possibility of explanatory circularity. We might wonder, for instance, how anything that, in a sense made light of in chapters 2 and 3, has its essential nature *determined* by the contingencies of our speech patterns and choices of words, could really explain (in a sense yet to be illuminated) *anything* about the significance of those patterns, their meaning, structure, etc. Propositions seem to have been cast in the role of explaining linguistic facts, and some of those facts are already logically related to the nature of propositions in a non-causal and non-explanatory way. For instance, part of what we want to explain, or have a framework for understanding, is how it's possible that two people could say or believe the same thing, and we posit propositions to do this in the manner above. But, in some sense, the fact that we speak in this manner, or that there are conventions we follow in speaking this way, is supposed to be partly determinative of the notion of a proposition, and determines the ontological nature of propositions, by determining the existence and identity conditions associated with terms referring to them. It almost looks as if in order to explain what the nature of propositions is and why or how they have the natures they do, on the minimalist account, we have to appeal to the very linguistic practices we are supposed to be explaining by reference to them, and that does sound at least a bit troubling.

Of course, among the most persistent is the abstractness objection; our explanatory paradigm, as exemplified in the natural sciences, seems essentially to involve some sort of causal relation of posited entities to the facts or phenomena they are supposed to play a role in explaining. However, propositions, in virtue of being apparently non-causal abstracta, would appear to be incapable of playing *any* kind of genuine causal-explanatory role—at least in any sense which would attribute to them any

sort of causal power. This objection is made all the more relevant by minimalism, since the minimalist's propositions are conservative in the sense articulated in the previous chapter. It's hard to imagine how such entities, whose addition to a physicalistic ontology cannot, in principle, "disturb the pre-existing causal order," could be in any way causally, and therefore explanatorily relevant.

In addition, there appears to be at least one purely logical reason for not assigning any sort of causal-explanatory status to propositions. Things having any sort of causal relevance –seemingly a necessary condition for having causal-explanatory value, can usually be assigned some sort of counterfactual value. For instance, one intuitive way of articulating or making the case for the idea that a given entity or event  $e$  is causally relevant to something  $f$  (e.g. a virus to a disease), is to say or provide evidence that if  $e$  did not exist/happen, then  $f$  would not be the case (e.g. if there were no HIV virus, then so-and-so would never have gotten AIDS). However it makes no sense to assign genuine counterfactual value to propositions themselves, independently perhaps of the specific instances of propositional attitude properties of believing, desiring, and so on. (As I will argue below, while there may be a case to be made for thinking that *believing that a car is speeding towards me* and *desiring to remain unharmed* may be causally relevant to my jumping out of the road, it's hard to make sense of the idea that *the proposition that a car is speeding toward me* is in any way causally relevant to my so moving).

The problem is that assigning propositions *themselves* any genuine counterfactual value is in tension with our avowed attribution of propositions as necessary existents. As Alex Oliver (1996, 8-9) has pointed out (in a different context), nothing can counterfactually depend on a necessarily existing object. In other words, it appears to

make no sense to say that it is *because* a given proposition exists (e.g. that there's a car speeding towards me) that I behave in a particular way (jumping onto the curb). More precisely, there can be no sensible counterfactual analysis of this or any other action as essentially depending on the existence of any proposition, given their ontological status as necessary beings. The following is a suggestion as to why that is, though I'm less confident of it than I am of that fact *that* it is. If we assume that we can pick out what is counterfactually relevant to or about a given situation, event, or state of affairs, it seems that what we pick out must be the sort of thing that can vary from world to world. What varies from world to world, of course, are contingent, or non-necessary beings and states of affairs. But then the problem with assigning a counterfactual dependence of contingent states of affairs on propositions is that the existence of propositions, qua necessary existents, do *not* vary from world to world, and hence cannot be the sorts of things whose existence is counterfactually relevant. In other words, we cannot consistently ascribe propositions any sort of counterfactual value and at the same time call them necessary existents.

Perhaps the most troubling worry, however, is that proposition theory, as understood on the minimalist model, appears to be capable of offering us nothing more than dormitive virtue explanations. Dormitive virtue explanations are really just pseudo-explanations, cleverly worded restatements of the facts to be explained. Thus, dormitive virtue explanations are only trivially correct and un-illuminating. Certainly this is the problem with the explanation that poppies put people to sleep because they have the dormitive virtue; the dormitive virtue is the power to put people to sleep, so the proposed explanation just tells us that they put people to sleep because they have the power to put



people to sleep. What we wanted out of an explanation here was to understand *how* or *why* (perhaps also *in virtue of what*) they put people to sleep, and instead we're merely told that they *can* do so –no real explanation at all.

The minimalist's account of propositions appears to run the risk of validating the ontological ambitions of proposition theory while at the same time rendering them trivial. If the minimalist is right, then the existence of propositions "explains" how speakers of different languages can utter sentences that mean the same thing, or have the same beliefs, at the expense of making it trivial or analytic that propositions are the sorts of things that meaningful utterances express and the sorts of things that our attitudes are directed at in order to have content. Looked at in this way, one begins to wonder how the minimalist can provide us with explanations of any significance, or really anything other than dormitive virtue explanations.

The problem, then, is that the minimalist seems to have solved the epistemological problems, about how we can come to know of and about propositions, at the expense of making proposition theory seem explanatorily (and perhaps generally) irrelevant. Sure, we can know what propositions are, that they exist, and that they are the sorts of things we thought they were (at least insofar as they are the sorts of things that play certain theoretical roles) –all quite easily and trivially so. But now that we know all this, we might begin to wonder why we should *care* about whether they exist. The whole idea of positing propositions, whether one is a minimalist, a reductionist, or a heavy-duty Platonist, seemed to be that doing so could give us an illuminating or informative account of certain facts about linguistic and attitudinal content, and so on. Now we're told that in saying there are propositions, we are merely re-stating the assumptions that, for instance,

utterances and attitudes have content, or that contradiction is a genuine relation, no more, no less. But then, why should we care? We haven't said anything the least bit informative.

The foregoing set of concerns then should provide good enough reason for being suspicious of the idea that propositions can play the role assigned to them according to the core or common conception in anything like a genuinely *explanatory* way, be it causal or otherwise. This is, of course, not to rule out the very idea –what I have provided motivates the non-explanatory view of pleonastic propositions as the *prima facie*, default setting, so to speak, which must be persuasively overcome in order to seriously consider any sort of contrary position. Without question, this should put propositionalists in an uncomfortable state with regards to the relevance of proposition theory, one it is my aim to rectify, or, more modestly, at least point the way to some sort of rectification. What I propose to discuss below, then, is two possible ways of rectification. The most obvious, and probably most conventional strategy of rectification would attempt to demonstrate the relevance of propositions and proposition theory by articulating and arguing for a sense in which we can, despite the *prima facie* case given above, attribute to propositions some sort of genuinely explanatory (causal or otherwise) relevance. Such a strategy would seem to operate on something like the assumption that proposition theory must, if it is to be relevant, assign some sort of non-trivial role or relevance (explanatory or otherwise) to *propositions themselves*, for instance, in virtue of the fact that we apparently make reference to them in giving certain sorts of explanations of intentional action (such as jumping onto curbs in order to avoid speeding cars) and so on. We have already provided the *prima facie* case against the causal- explanatory view

of the relevance of propositions. The dormitive virtue objection, however, goes quite beyond these modest doubts to seemingly preclude the very possibility of any explanatory relevance for propositions. These are the issues we'll have to take up if we're to insist that anything we've said up to this point is really worthy of anyone's attention. If we're to escape them, we'll need to find some sense in which we can defensibly claim that proposition theory has some relevance or usefulness, explanatory or otherwise. What and whether other sorts of properties, aside from causal/counterfactual can be attributed to propositions that would justify counting them among the explanatorily or otherwise relevant entities remains to be seen.

*2. Propositions and explanatory roles: Schiffer's propositional explanationism.* Perhaps we oughtn't to be so quick in dismissing the possibility of propositions being somehow explanatorily relevant, despite their evident inability to be causes. Schiffer's (2003) apparent position is that pleonastic propositions play something akin to an explanatory role in our understanding of how we come to certain sorts of knowledge, specifically those that rely upon or result in knowledge about the beliefs and desires of other people. If such a case can be made, proposition theory might be saved from claims of triviality and irrelevance.

Schiffer's view on the theoretical value of propositions privileges their role in explaining how we learn certain things about the world, in particular the sort of knowledge we can gain by using information about the propositional attitudes of others.

As he puts it, propositions are useful in virtue of the fact that

...they help us both to exploit the propositional attitudes of others as sources of information about the extra-cranial world and to exploit the extra-cranial world as sources of information about the propositional attitudes of others. (2003, 300)

The particular sorts of facts that we refer to propositions in order to explain, according to Schiffer, include the following:

- a) Often we can infer and thereby come to know that  $p$  from the fact that someone utters " $p$ ." More specifically, we infer from their utterance that they believe  $p$ , and we infer from their belief that  $p$ .
- b) Often we can also infer and thereby come to know that a person believes that  $p$  from the fact that " $p$ " is true. These sorts of inferences are important in predicting behavior; from information about a) what the world is like, b) what  $S$  believes, and c) what  $S$  wants, we can often predict  $S$ 's behavior. (2003, 300)

In addition, we refer to propositions when we give apparently correct explanations of the following sorts:

- 1) Explanations of intentional mental states, such as desire:

Sally wants to go to the mall because she believes her friends will all be there.

- 2) Explanations of intentional actions:

Ava raised her hand because she believed that by doing so she could get the waiter to bring the bill.

- 3) Explanations of non- intentional facts:

Henry's face turned red because he realized who it was that had just overheard him saying that Britney spears was a better soprano than any opera singer the met could produce. (2003, 314)

In order to explain instances of facts such as these, we draw on what Schiffer calls *head-world reliability correlations* (hwr-correlations). These are divided into two kinds: those that make facts of certain kinds reliable indicators that people of certain kinds believe those facts, and those that make the fact that certain people have beliefs of certain kinds reliable indicators of the truth of those propositions. On this view, we can be justified in making inferences like a and b above because we have some knowledge of these hwr-correlations, specifically by our access to propositions. (2003, 301)

Head-world reliability correlations are, then, correlations that make what someone believes a reliable indicator of what is the case (and vice versa). Certainly, we are most of us committed to there being such correlations insofar as we believe that testimony is a genuine source of knowledge about the world. It's also clear that we make reference to propositions –in so far as they are involved in propositional attitude properties such as believing that all of one's friends will be at the mall or that by waving one's hand, one can get the attention of a waiter.

The hwr-correlations that are describable by appeal to propositions are “underlain” by hwr- correlations (such as a & b above) that are *not* describable by appeal to propositions. According to Schiffer, the latter correlations mostly “pertain to how external events cause the brain states that subserve or are, belief states, and how those brain states, via their effects on bodily movements, cause external events.” (2003, 302)

The basic idea here seems to be that our proposition talk (i.e. our practice of so referring to individual propositions through our propositional attitude attributions) allows us to index certain sorts of brain states to external events and vice versa. Certain of these reliability correlations are describable by appeal to propositions, as we just noted, as

when we say that one is justified in believing and can come to know that P when a particularly reliable person says P in earnest and we come to believe it on that basis.

Since we don't have access to the correlations *not* describable by appeal to propositions, in order to exploit them we need a system that does two things: i) indexes relevant brain states, and ii) correlates the brain states with external states of affairs. Presumably, for Schiffer, this could be described as a primary function of proposition talk, as he says that “[t]he propositions in the range of our propositional attitude relations provide such a system of indices.” (2003, 302)

Let's call what we describe in the above manner by appeal to propositions belief-states; perhaps we can do no better than to describe them and individuate them in these terms, as Schiffer says –that, at least, appears to be his main point about the usefulness of propositions, that we require something like the theoretical apparatus of propositions in order to do so (i.e. to describe and individuate them). The importance of describing and individuating propositions from this point of view, is, as Schiffer notes, primarily *functional*; the usefulness of so talking is a result of said propositions (or perhaps, as I argue below, merely the descriptions of them) being devices for typing and correlating these brain states in terms of their functional roles. (2003, 302, 304)

So then, let's also grant the assumption that what we're calling belief- states supervene on purely physical states of a person (or their brain or central nervous system); the reliability correlations we describe by appeal to propositions and propositional attitudes, must, on the supervenience hypothesis, ultimately supervene on the reliability correlations that exist between the subvening states and external events they are reliable indicators of. While we have *some* sort of access to what we call belief states, both in

ourselves and others, which we state *by appeal* to propositions (i.e. utilizing the devices of proposition- affirming linguistic practices), the other sorts of correlations, those which, by hypothesis, they supervene on are, at present, not accessible and may not even be tractable for us. What this amounts to is that the belief- states that we are capable of describing via the notions of proposition and belief provide a system of indices that relate the subvening person-states to external events.

All of this attests to the incredible usefulness of our proposition talk, i.e. our use of the various linguistic constructions for referring to and distinguishing between propositions. We saw that Schiffer's minimalist understanding of propositional ontology allows us to have both a systematic understanding of what we are doing when we use the linguistic devices for referring to propositions, and gives us an understanding of propositions that allows us to see that our apparently referential ambitions are not *merely* apparent.

We might wonder, however, given only the above, in what way this implies anything like a genuine *explanatory* role, or more generally, any genuine use or *usefulness*, for propositions themselves, as opposed to the manner of speaking in which we refer to them. It seems possible that these linguistic constructions could be useful, and that the sorts of propositions they allow us to articulate and express could be true (a necessary condition of which may be the existence of pleonastic propositions), without having to attribute to propositions themselves any sort of explanatory role beyond the pseudo- explanatory roles they exhibit as hypostatizations of meaning, content, and the like. This sort of view could be part of what Schiffer alludes to when he says that propositions "an extremely important role in our conceptual economy," (2003, 300) and

by saying that the head- world reliability correlations are *describable by appeal to* propositions. (2003, 302)

Though it may only be a rhetorical difference, Schiffer seems also in places to be suggesting that it is the *propositions themselves*, and not merely our linguistic practices (nicely straightened and developed by his minimalist proposition theory) of referring to and distinguishing between them that are useful to us. Let's then sketch a basic distinction between the two sorts of positions that are suggested (if not endorsed), of that between 1) taking propositions themselves to play some (direct or indirect) useful role in explanations and 2) taking *proposition talk* as playing some sort of useful role. In what immediately follows I will simply try to distinguish the first of these, which we might call propositional explanationism, and sketch reasons for thinking that the second of the two positions is preferable to a minimalist about propositions.

*2.1. Propositions and the role of propositional attitude properties.* If there is a case to be made for a genuine explanatory role for propositions, such as would give sense to the notion that we can in any literal way *use* propositions in anything like correct explanations, causal or otherwise, it might come by the way of Schiffer's claim that *propositional attitude properties* play a role in explaining intentional and non- intentional actions such as described in 1-3 above. Another look at 1-3 reveals that these sentences express intuitively correct explanations of the facts they seek to in virtue of referring to propositional attitude properties such as the property of believing that all of her friends will be there (when possessed by Sally). This, of course, presupposes the indexing utility of the *concept* of propositions, but *could* be used to go further in ascribing to propositions a something like a causal- explanatory role.



Let's make two assumptions Schiffer provides a wealth of argument for and defense of in chapter eight of *The Things We Mean*. First, that propositional attitude properties such as are made reference to in 1-3 are explanatorily relevant to the actions and facts we seek to explain by reference to them. Let us also assume with Schiffer that pleonastic propositions, because of their finely-grained individuation conditions (Schiffer 2003, 88), are the only sorts of propositions (or the only sorts of entities of any kind, for that matter) that could play the sorts of roles required to make propositional attitude properties explanatorily relevant in the right sorts of ways. It doesn't seem like much of a leap at all to then to say that the propositions are *themselves* explanatorily relevant, i.e. that they play some sort of role in what appear to be correct explanations of intentional actions. After all, it makes a difference *which* proposition one believes or fears, or has any other attitude towards; which propositions one is attitudinally oriented towards either determines or plays a constitutive role in determining which propositional attitude property one exemplifies.

In order to evaluate such an argument we'll either need to find a defensible principle whereby we can infer from the explanatory role of the property of believing that P to the explanatory role of that P, or find an independent criterion for explanatory relevance we can apply to propositions as they occur in propositional attitude properties. Since Schiffer provides us with such criteria in arguing for the explanatory relevance of propositional attitude properties—the counterfactual value and the predictive value of statements involving them, let's begin with those.

The propositions expressed by propositional-attitude because-statements play such an important role for us—whether or not we decide to call them causal explanations or even explanations—because, quite simply, they have both *counterfactual* value and *predictive* value, in the following sense:

*Counterfactual value.* If someone did something because she had such-and-such propositional

attitudes, then, all other things being equal, *she would not have done what she did if she hadn't had those propositional attitudes.*

*Predictive value.* We have *epistemic access* to the propositional attitudes of others, and *we can often predict what they will do on the basis of knowing what they believe and want.* (2003, 347-8)

To reprise an example of Schiffer's, suppose a woman about to cross the street steps off the curb and immediately steps back, narrowly avoiding a speeding car. To explain her action, we might say that she stepped back onto the curb *because* she believed a car was coming and she wanted to avoid being hit by it; the *property of believing that a car was coming* (or perhaps the articulation and individuation of it, through our property-introducing linguistic practices) seems to play an essential role in explaining what caused her to step back. No doubt it is further correct to say that had she *not* had that property, other things being equal, she probably would not have stepped back to the curb. This can at least plausibly be taken as a reason for thinking that the property itself (or perhaps the possession of it) is causally, and hence explanatorily relevant, even if counterfactuals are not generally an airtight guide to causality. But the proposition that a car was speeding towards her (ignoring problems about essential indexicality) is an essential component of this property, and is such that if she had a belief relation to some other proposition in its stead, all else being equal, she probably would not have stepped back.

Things are similar with the criterion of predictive success. Consider the following example: Nellie is a Catholic, thoroughly ridden with guilt for having what she believes to be "impure" thoughts. After speaking with her, we learn that she wants to ensure her admittance to heaven, but cannot rid herself of the occasional troubling thought. If we were to convince her that she could gain such insurance by donating her life savings to church-related charities, we could predict her doing so. We can predict her eventually committing an intentional action along these lines because we know that she has the

relevant propositional attitude properties of belief and desire, and what their approximate content is. Again, it seems trivial that if our knowledge of these properties is causally relevant to explaining how we could correctly predict this, then the essential components of the properties –the propositions which constitute their content, seem no less so.

Perhaps one immediate instinct in reaction to this is just to say that these sorts of properties, and the propositions which partly constitute them, are superfluous in the explanations we give, given that there is probably another purely physical (or perhaps, more specifically, neurological) explanation of the actions we seek to explain or understand which makes no reference to intentions, beliefs, or desires. But, as Schiffer acknowledges, this would fail to account for the fact that we can use our knowledge of people's *intentional* states to make correct predictions and explanations of human action without the sort of knowledge required to explain these actions on the brute physical or neurological level –that sort of knowledge may not be accessible to us, and need not be in order for us to fruitfully wield propositional attitude notions in the ways we clearly do.

Nonetheless, Schiffer also acknowledges that the sorts of propositional- attitude because- statements acquire their counterfactual value from the fact that the properties in question supervene on belief- or brain- states that are indexed by propositions (2003, 348). Propositions, as Schiffer describes the situation, acquire *their* usefulness in virtue of the fact that *they* allow us to exploit head-world reliability correlations, the sorts of non-intentional facts we are categorizing in referring to and distinguishing between propositions. It's hard not to think, because of this, that it is fundamentally these non-intentional facts that are really doing all the real explanatory work, and that our linguistic practices for referring to propositions serve merely as a useful, perhaps even

indispensable linguistic devices for harnessing them. Recall also that propositions, according to Schiffer's pleonastic ontology, are trivial hyponymizations of our intuitive assumptions about meaning, content, and certain logical relations, entities whose status as abstract, necessary, conservative extensions seem to render them, in principle, causally inert from the get-go, and further that appeal to them is something akin to an appeal to a dormitive virtue. These thoughts can be thought to provide some initial motivation the second, more deflationary option with regards to the relevance and usefulness of proposition theory sketched above.

Given also the availability of other sorts of non-intentional facts (those we have access to, in some sense *by virtue of* referring to, or having the linguistic means to refer to, and therefore think about, propositions), we should try to be as cautious as we can here about assigning any kind of causal or otherwise explanatory status to propositions – things I and the minimalist generally are explicitly committed to saying are causally inert.

I have already, at the beginning of this chapter, sketched my reasons for thinking that the counterfactual criterion of explanatory usefulness simply cannot apply to the propositions themselves. The only plausible candidate left for counterfactual dependence is the (having of?) propositional attitude properties such as *having* a particular belief, such as the property of believing that a car is coming. I've already said already said why I think that the counterfactual value of possessing this property seems to bottom out in a subvening physical state – that which our proposition talk allows us to utilize in exploiting hwr-correlations.

Nonetheless, Schiffer, seeming to shift focus from the apparent causal-explanatory role of propositional attitude properties, seems to acknowledge just the sorts

of worries we've been concerned to articulate concerning the explanationist line. In the following passages, however, he apparently gives us a reason for thinking that *propositions themselves* are in some sense explanatorily relevant not in the usual way that for instance, viruses and black holes are –by being causes, but instead in the way that numbers are sometimes said to be explanatorily relevant to physicists:

Philosophers sometimes worry about how mathematical entities can play a causal-explanatory role. After all, numbers being abstract entities outside space-time, are not things which with anything can causally interact, so how can something's standing in relation to a number causally explain anything? Since propositions are also abstract entities with which it is impossible for anything to causally interact, they are subject to the same worry.

His response to this objection is to use a paradigm case argument to turn this intuition on its head:

At least propositions are not worse off than numbers, and it is pretty clear that numbers play *some* sort of causal-explanatory role; after all, the read out on the scale is '124' because the person standing on it weighs 124 pounds. True, we can't interact with the number 124, but how does it follow from that that the property of weighing 124 pounds can't play an explanatory role in causal explanations, especially since it's true that the scale wouldn't read '124' if the person on it didn't weigh 124 pounds? ...in any event, propositions and numbers are in the same boat...(2003, 334)

Cases such as these are meant to demonstrate that despite the problems with assigning such entities any sort of causal or otherwise explanatory status, we really have no choice but to make reference to them in ostensibly true causal explanations. In other words, they still play some (perhaps indirect) role in explanations, albeit a different one than posited causes like viruses or black holes.

The question arises, however, as to what motivates the need to appeal to propositions as any sort of genuinely explanatory entity whatsoever. The sort of argument might (but certainly needn't) seem to suggest, at least in light of the present work, and especially in light of the traditional explanatory concerns with propositions theory, is that we must find some sort of explanatory relevance for the sorts of entities

themselves in order to justify positing them. Though I am not claiming this to be Schiffer's actual position, I think the issue nonetheless arises, and my claim now is that such explanatory concerns are completely obviated once we become minimalists about propositions in the way discussed in the previous chapter. For as minimalists (or pleonastic ontologists), we seem to have no need to make a case for the literal usefulness of the posited entities if they are the trivially existing propositions we've talked so much about. The existence of pleonastic propositions, which play all the roles assigned to them by the core or common conception laid out in chapter one, albeit trivially so, exist analytically and a priori, as is revealed by an analysis of our common practices of referring to and distinguishing between them. It also seems to me a strange question to ask, even conceding the sense in which we appeal to propositions and numbers, how it is that such entities are themselves *used* by us or anyone in offering such explanations, other than by being the referents of the terms we use. If this is the only "use" we have for them, it seems the apparent dormitive virtue character of the propositions we're referring to render the actual referents irrelevant. Again, perhaps it is only a rhetorical difference, but in so far as we can distinguish the two lines on the relevance of proposition theory, the first, an explanationist option, and a second, deflationist option, the latter of the two deserves some development in light of the foregoing discussion. I intend to bring out more fully the distinction and its consequences below by filling out the deflationist alternative, which takes the apparent uninformative, dormitive virtue explanatory status of proposition theory argued for in section 1 of this chapter as its point of departure.

3. *A pragmatic alternative.* We are trying to evaluate the relevance of proposition theory, given, as we have argued, that the minimalist is right about their ontological nature.

Explanationism, one position that's at least suggested (through the lens of the present dissertation, though not necessarily endorsed) by a reading of Schiffer's *The Things We Mean*, might save the notion of a proposition, and the linguistic practices which commit us to its instances, from irrelevance by assigning propositions a genuine role in explanations, for instance, in virtue of the fact that we make reference to them in giving certain sorts of explanations of intentional action and so on.

The alternative I wish to suggest might be called a form of propositional *pragmatism* (not to be confused with the Pragmatism –capital “P” —of Peirce and James). Such a view takes as foundational the observation that our ability to refer to propositions is useful in virtue of providing the means for articulating and expressing (and thus, believing, knowing, and so on) propositions we might find it otherwise difficult or impossible to express. To put it in another way, proposition- affirming linguistic practices, in giving us the means by which to refer to and distinguish between an indefinite number of trivially existing propositions as the contents of our attitudes and assertions, the fundamental bearers of truth and falsity, and so on, broadens the expressive power of our language and the scope of our ability to think and communicate in useful, perhaps even indispensable ways. If we can make sense of this, it will support the thesis that the primary value of proposition talk is not explanatory, i.e. in virtue of assigning some essential explanatory role to the sorts of things the theory makes reference to or ontologically commits us to, but rather in virtue of the thoughts it allows us to think and express, communicate, and so on. It implies that proposition theory's

main value is essentially pragmatic rather than explanatory –hence the name *pragmatism*.<sup>44</sup>

The pragmatism I will sketch and tentatively endorse below has some important similarities with recent deflationary or minimal theories of truth, such as advocated by philosophers such as Paul Horwich and Dorothy Grover (Beebe 2002). Such philosophers generally hold that substantive philosophical debates about the nature of truth are mistaken, and that the main value and meaning of “true” and its cognates concerns the sorts of linguistic and logical constructions it allows us to make. There is, according to many of these philosophers, nothing more to the concept of truth, and hence nothing more to the *nature* of truth, than is revealed by the ways in which we employ the concept. Indeed, minimalism about propositions, would already seem to have much in common with minimalism about truth, especially in light of the similar doctrines about the determination of the concepts central to each enterprise (propositions for us, truth for them). What I wish to emphasize here however concerns the minimalist thesis that our possession of the concept of truth, and the linguistic devices we use in order to employ it, allow us to state and organize information in useful ways –both in the sense that they allow us to express or state things more conveniently (the use of “is true” to simply endorse what someone else has said) and that they allow us to do things we otherwise might not be able to (i.e. to say of everything another person says that it is true is not only convenient, but might not be stateable without the concept of truth). In contrast to the explanationist position on propositions, I am claiming for proposition talk –the existentially committing, referential use of singular terms for propositions– something

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<sup>44</sup> This is pragmatism in the sense that Thomasson suggests a position she calls *metaphysical pragmatism* (forthcoming).



along similar lines, i.e. that having this linguistic practice (and therefore the concept of a proposition) is useful in much the same way as having the concept of truth is useful, again in contrast to the idea that propositions themselves are useful. In fact, as I will claim below, much of the pragmatic benefit of having the notion of truth cannot be gotten without something like the notion of a proposition, and vice versa. In a way similar to the sense in which the minimalist about truth “deflates” questions about the substantive nature of truth, the pragmatist conception of the relevance of the notion (and its utilization) of propositions should also deflate questions about the substantive (read: “extended”) nature, and explanatory capacities, of propositions. And while the usefulness of the notion of truth is something all (or nearly all) truth- theorists bring to the table *despite* deflationism, I hope that the usefulness of the notion of propositions, much of which was nicely articulated by Schiffer, is similarly demonstrated by something like pragmatism.

*3.1. Different senses of “useful.”* Central to the pragmatist view on propositions is a distinction between the usefulness of entities that a theory posits –which could be spelled out in terms of explanatory usefulness, as at least one reading of Schiffer’s *The Things We Mean* suggests with propositions, and, on the other hand, the usefulness of a linguistic practice which ostensibly *commits* us to those entities, i.e. the means by which such a practice provides for referring to and distinguishing between entities of a given kind –the purportedly referential terms themselves. The distinction, or something like it, is not new, perhaps having been implicit in fictionalist ideas about mathematical entities, and instrumentalist views in the philosophy of science. In contrast to those sorts of positions,

I will continue to insist that propositions exist not merely figuratively, but literally, and that the linguistic means for referring to and distinguishing between propositions are not *merely* instruments for achieving further aims we have –as I have argued, we often do refer to propositions and say things about them that are literally true. What I hope will emerge in the following is that what appears to be the central ontological question – whether propositions really exist– is not really what’s at issue concerning the relevance of proposition talk. What’s really of importance is that we are, by virtue of possessing the concept of a proposition, able to do things we might not otherwise be able to do, i.e. it’s proposition talk, not propositions themselves, that is genuinely useful. The ontological question, however, is answered in a way favorable to proposition ontologists, albeit trivially so, so long as we have the linguistic practice in question, since if we utilize proposition talk as the minimalist has analyzed it, the existence of propositions we refer to in so talking “come along for the ride” so to speak, at no further charge. The point, however, is that their existence, though not itself derivative, is of only derivative *importance* to the practice of referring to and distinguishing between them. My hope is that this is yet another way of filling out the minimalistic guiding metaphor, which Schiffer attributes to David Armstrong, of propositions as the “shadows of sentences,” i.e. of our more mundane linguistic practices and entities, rather than taking that metaphor to suggest anything like ontological dependence on sentences or our linguistic practices.

We can begin to fill out the distinction negatively by showing that in a relevant sense, and perhaps lending currency to the explanatory worries rehearsed above, propositions themselves do not seem to be the sorts of things that can really be thought of

as *useful*. Again, one possible view suggested by a reading of *The Things We Mean* (though not necessarily Schiffer's endorsed view) is that propositions gain a genuine usefulness by playing an essential role in indexing head-world reliability correlations. This suggests that we look deeper into what it means for something to be an index of *any* sort. A mercury thermometer is a fairly uncontroversial example of something that can be used to successfully index states of affairs. When functioning properly, thermometers can serve as systems of indices, correlating mercury levels and numbered lines with outside temperatures. The only reason, however, that such thermometers can serve as indices of any sort *for us* –the only sorts of indices we might have reason to talk about– of *any* kind, is in virtue of our *access* to them in a particular way. In the case of the thermometers, we have access to them via sense- perception; we can perceive the changes in the level of the mercury, and it is these changes which indicate changes in temperature to us. What I am most unsure about concerning the above propositions-as-indices proposal, or any account that would apparently assign propositions *themselves* any similar sort of usefulness, is the idea that we can have any analogous access to propositions such as would enable us to *use* them in any analogous sense. A minimalist understanding of the concept leaves scarcely anything open to us that would count as access to propositions in virtue of which we could use them as indices to *anything*. Propositions, on the minimalist analysis, do not, by themselves, actually indicate *anything* about reality, save in the sense that they are *indicators* in the quasi-technical way articulated in chapter two; but that is merely to say that they represent possible states of affairs (perhaps under particular guises) or something of the sort. This is without question a crucial feature of propositional linguistic practices, given our epistemological,

expressive, and communicative interests. Certainly, however, more than this is required of a given entity, in relation to us, that we can literally use *it* as an index. In the ordinary sense of “indicate” that we are working with here, in which the mercury’s lining up with a certain numbered line on the thermometer indicates that it is a certain temperature outside, propositions do not indicate *anything* for us. Rather, it seems we should say that *evidence that a certain proposition is believed by a given person in the right context* is properly speaking, an indicator. For instance when someone *expresses* the proposition that it’s raining by assertively uttering the sentence “It’s raining”, this can, in certain contexts, indicate that a given proposition is true.

There is without question something of the nature of indexing going on here, and the notion of a proposition is involved, as Schiffer has shown; my intention here is to say how it is involved in such a way as to avoid attributing to propositions *themselves* any sort of notion of usefulness and instead illustrate the importance of proposition talk. The proposal on the table is that it is not propositions themselves, which provide us with such a system of indices, are useful, but rather that it is the *concept* of a proposition, embodied in our propositional linguistic practices, which allows us to do so. What this proposal has going for it is this, at least: it’s clear that we do have the right sort of access to, and do in fact utilize the concept of a proposition in ways that don’t seem appropriate to label our access to propositions. Possession of the concept of a proposition is, *al la* minimalism, constituted by the ability to participate in a linguistic practice. We exhibit mastery of this concept via certain patterns of speech, inferences, transformations and the like, some of which allow us to identify and distinguish between the propositions we express, understand, and have attitudes towards. It is because we have and employ this concept

that we are able to organize that-clause linguistic constructions and construction-types into systems of indices. My claim, then, is that proposition theory is useful in virtue of allowing us to utilize propositional notions in order to state certain sorts of truths we might find it otherwise difficult or even impossible to state. The head-world reliability correlations that the capacity for referring to propositions allows us to harness exemplify this usefulness, or pragmatic value.

*3.2. Some uses of proposition talk.* I've claimed that proposition talk, or the conventions we have for referring to and distinguishing between propositions, rather than propositions themselves, are useful for many of our theoretical purposes. The purposes for which proposition talk are useful can fruitfully be gleaned from a survey of the various uses for which we employ the notion in our theoretical practices, which I introduced back in the beginning sections of chapter one. While conceding that neither propositions nor the notions we have of them may actually be fit to play any genuinely *explanatory* role in the sense for which they are often conceived to be, i.e. by giving informative analyses of linguistic, logical, and mental facts, we can nonetheless point more explicitly to the ways in which having these linguistic conventions and devices might be thought to enrich our theoretical vocabulary in the ways I've alluded to.

The two questions, then, that I wish to sketch answers to below concern first, why it might be useful to have devices for referring to propositions, i.e., *that-clauses* and descriptive phrases such as “what so and so believes/says,” and secondly, why, given the ability to so refer to these entities, we might find it useful to also have the term “proposition” –a general term for what the sorts of things terms refer to. The first seems the more basic and pressing question in virtue of the fact that ordinary language would

seem to be expressively gutted in many ways without it –the notion of content, both linguistic and mental, seems quite essential to much of our ordinary and communicative practices (think of what we could not say were we unable to refer to what someone might have said or thought!). On top of this, as we will see below, the ability to so refer seems essential to many of our uses of the truth predicate. The second question seems a bit less pressing to the purposes of ordinary speakers and everyday life, since most of us don't learn to use the word "proposition" in this way before taking classes in philosophy, but no less requires an answer given my theoretical purposes.

As it's been suggested above, the minimalist about propositions can take his cue from the minimalist about truth concerning how to show that a given set of linguistic devices is useful. The minimalist about truth argues that the truth predicate is an essential device of abstraction and generalization, allowing us to (but not limited to) quantify over and endorse a number of propositions at once without having to list or conjoin them, and while ignoring what might be, for the speaker's purposes, insignificant details of how they were expressed, as, for example, in "everything Brodeur says about goatending is true." But propositions themselves are the fundamental truth-bearers, as I argued in chapter one, so that in order to so make use of the truth predicate to make such convenient generalizations, we need devices for referring to the sorts of things we would be endorsing, conditionally or otherwise. And since Martin Brodeur is French-Canadian, and may say things about his profession in either English or French, we can assume that the sorts of things he says or thinks about goatending can be quantified over and endorsed by us in abstraction from the particular language in which he expresses them, confirming the various sorts of language-independence we attribute to propositions. This

is precisely where the usefulness of that-clauses and other devices for referring to propositions (“what he said”, “what she believes”, and so on), all of which seem to presuppose the more basic practice of so using that-clauses.

But then why do we need to explicitly introduce the term “proposition,” over and above these devices for referring to them? The general term is just that, a device of generalization for talking about all the propositions, but why is it useful –if not to ordinary speakers, then to theorists? Well, we can certainly observe it’s usefulness in a field like logic, where theorists have reasons for talking about what someone said, again in abstraction from details like the language and other aspects of context in which it was expressed, and even the particular content of the expression, while keeping fixed it’s purely formal aspects, such as entailment relations and so on. For instance, when considering *modus ponens* purely as a formal rule of inference, we assume that the variables P and Q stand for a certain type of entity –propositions, but we are not interested in their content so long as they are propositions –the sorts of things which most fundamentally have entailment relations and truth values. Given that, and only that, we know that from P and if P, then Q, we may infer Q. In fact, in this respect the utilization of the notion of a proposition by logicians isn’t all that different than the use of “vertebrate” by biologists; while ordinary speakers can get on quite well without needing to talk explicitly of vertebrates (as opposed to cats, dogs, horses, and so on), neither do they need to use the term “proposition” (as opposed to “she said that...” and “what he thinks”, and so on). Nevertheless, it’s clear that each term has important uses, again, as a device of generalization for a set of specialists.

As we saw, another original motivation for positing propositions was to have a way

of ‘explaining’ how speakers of distinct languages could perform utterances in their native tongues that could have the same linguistic meaning, and so give an account of what it means for an uttered or inscribed sentence to be translated from one language to another. But as we saw, propositions don’t seem to be the sorts of things appropriate to play any genuine explanatory role here or anywhere. Instead, what we should say as minimalists is that proposition talk provides a useful device for speaking of what it means for a sentence to be properly translated from one language or idiolect to another. In other words, saying that two sentences of different languages express the same proposition isn’t a way of *explaining why* one is a good translation of the other; it’s simply a formal way of *saying that they are* good translations, whatever the standards for that turn out to be.

*3.3. Pragmatism and worries about explanation.* We mentioned above that our pragmatic alternative would appear to avoid the explanatory worries mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, especially the abstractness objection and the dormitive virtue objections. The primary assumption behind these objections is that propositions are posited in order to play some sort of non-trivial explanatory role in accounts of the nature of linguistic meaning, attitudinal content, and so on. The pragmatic view does not require entities posited by a theory to be explanatorily relevant, or even that the entities such a theory would commit us to even need exist (though, of course, it needn’t deny either of these on behalf of a theory –the door is still open to claim that propositions play some sort of explanatory role). All that is required is that our commitment to them, embodied in our linguistic practice of referring to the entities in question (which allows that propositions exist and that we can refer to them), be useful. Of course, with all this,



we should keep in mind that given the minimalism I've defended above, it follows trivially from these practices that these entities exist.

How such a theory needs to be useful in order for it to be relevant in the sense we are submitting for proposition theory will vary depending on the purposes we have in mind for using the theory. In the case of proposition theory, as I've argued in the previous section, it isn't hard to think of epistemological and communicative purposes we have for which the linguistic means for referring to propositions are incredibly useful – Schiffer's discussion of head-world reliability correlations is ample demonstration of that.

My position, then, is that proposition talk provides the means to our epistemological, explanatory, and predictive ends by allowing us to articulate the propositional attitude properties we make reference to in order to utilize head-world reliability correlations and state correct explanations of the kinds of behavior and knowledge that Schiffer's zeroed in on. In addition, they allow us to abstract from irrelevant considerations of wording and language in describing what others have said, thought, and the logical relations that obtain between them.

*3.4. A question and an objection anticipated.* With this the stated position, I'd like to address one final question and an objection. The question: how, precisely, does this show that proposition theory is itself relevant in such a way as to remove the apparent triviality of proposition talk?

As we've argued above, the application of a theory or linguistic practice may be useful in the ways we've articulated while being false or even truth-valueless (in case singular terms utilized do not refer). This is not to say that propositions do not exist, but

that such an argument does not seem relevant to arguing that they do –only that it is useful to *say* that they do, i.e. to be ontologically committed to them, or to talk as though we are. What I am suggesting is that we already know that propositions exist –since our irreducible commitment to their existence “comes along for the ride,” free of charge so long as we talk in this way, but that their existence is trivial, it is nonetheless theoretically useful to be able to refer to them, and that this shows that our practice of referring to them important and useful.

The objection I wish to consider, perhaps an instance of a more general kind of objection against the theory, attempts to raise again the issue of circularity discussed at the beginning of this chapter, originally aimed at the propositional explanationist, and might be put in the following way. These linguistic devices for referring to propositions are indeed useful, but aren't they useful in virtue of *having meaning*, i.e. in contributing to the content of the sentences we use them in? And if this is the case, don't we need to appeal to the notion of content, i.e. propositions, in order to understand how it is that these devices are capable of being useful? Doesn't this then simply open the door to an analogue of the circularity problem, and show that many of the same concerns, expressed above concerning the supposed explanatory status of propositions, are entirely independent of whether you take propositions to be explanatorily relevant?

The correct response to this, I think, goes something like this. It's not a problem at all, in fact, it's a trivial consequence of proposition theory, on the minimalist view, that the notion of meaning as it applies to words and phrases must be related in some way to the notion of content, i.e. propositions. This might be the root of some sort of objection only if it were informative, however it's not –it's just a restatement of two assumptions

unproblematic to minimalism and the pragmatic view. One, that words, phrases, and other linguistic devices must be meaningful in order to be useful in some of the ways that singular terms for referring to propositions are, and two, that linguistic units smaller than whole sentences gain their significance by virtue of how they contribute to the significance of sentences in which they can occur. But, in addition, to assume that anything of this kind could be a problem for the minimalist theory of propositions, or the pragmatist account of their relevance, is most likely to suppose that the notion of a proposition is supposed to do more than the pragmatist thinks that it can, such as “accounting for” linguistic, mental, and logical facts, or being the concept of the sorts of things, “in virtue of which” spoken sentences acquire meanings or contradict other sentences, and so on. But here, as is often the case, the critic just uses the language of “accounting for” or “in virtue of,” which seems a thinly veiled way of dodging explicitly “explanatory” language in metaphysics. This just slips back under the door the sorts of concerns that the *pragmatist-cum-minimalist* thinks is misplaced in the present inquiry.

### **Conclusion.**

I began in chapter one by considering various reasons for taking proposition talk, and the kind of theories which try to understand it as straightforwardly referential, seriously. These reasons comprise the “core” of proposition theory, each arising from the apparent need for things playing one or another theoretical role, such as content, truth-bearer, and the like. Originally the pull to take these reasons seriously seems to arise from a need to explain purported facts of meaning –such as the idea that content can be shared, that something other than the humble linguistic items we are familiar with are

needed to be true and false, implied and contradicted. I then argued that, whatever the case concerning their explanatory status, there are certain ontological features which must be attributed to the referents of the singular terms centrally employed by people engaged in the propositional linguistic practices; the referents, if there are any, must be abstract, mind and language- independent beings, and in the most ontologically interesting cases – general propositions, they are also necessary existents– if they are to be capable of playing the theoretical roles which they are attributed by people speaking in specific ways about or involving attitudes, content, and the like. These features seem to open the door certain ontological, epistemological, and explanatory concerns about their possessors; there appear to be further, unanswered questions about the nature of these entities, concerning what they are like, *how* they play the theoretical roles attributed to them, about how we could come to know of and about these entities both generally and in such a way as to justify any answers to the two previous concerns. In addition, however we end up choosing to answer these epistemological problems, we are seemingly forced to confront a whole new set of explanatory concerns due to the fact that the central reasons for positing propositions, or, at least, what appears to be the most intuitive way of interpreting these reasons, involves the idea that propositions are essentially explanatory entities. If this is correct, then it would be natural to assume that by reference to propositions we can give enlightening explanations or answers to very basic and general questions about the nature of certain linguistic, logical, and mental facts. But there are genuine and inescapable concerns about how by referring to propositions we can give

such informative or substantive explanations in answer to these questions, given the ontological status of these entities that falls out of the core motivations for positing them, not least of which is their abstract and apparently non-causal character.

There are different ways to begin to fill out answers to some of these questions, and there are a number of developed ontologies which purport to do so, among them, the Fregean's, the Russellian's, and the possible worlds theorist's. While Fregeanism, all by itself, doesn't appear to do much better (or worse) than the generic picture offered by the "core," Russellianism and possible worlds theory each offer a more detailed ontological picture, but at the apparent risk of exacerbating the epistemological worries and ignoring the explanatory worries, especially if they, along with the Platonist, insist that our knowledge of the existence and natures of propositions must come from language- and mind-independent inquiry.

We seemed, then, to have a good idea of what propositions should be "doing" for us, playing the theoretical roles assigned by the "core," but were not entirely satisfied with the prospects of a Platonist or reductionist approach to what propositions are and how they "do" this. This motivated a fresh look at our theoretical goals and perhaps a new way of conceiving of propositions and proposition theory. Minimalist ontology, embodied, for the most part, in Schiffer's pleonastic account of propositions, appeared to have the potential to deal with the above sorts of worries, or at least the ontological and epistemological ones, by deflating them. If we could show that there really isn't much more to the ontology of propositions than what is already revealed in our common and conventional ways of discoursing about truth, attitudes, and meaning, we'd no longer

have to worry about the ontological status of propositions, and might show how to conceive of them as the sorts of things we can know of and about easily and unmysteriously.

In chapter two we found it impossible to construe propositions as ontologically dependent upon us in any significant way in virtue of their status as necessary existents, which appears necessitated by the ontological picture that falls out of the core constraints. In so doing we began to clarify the sense in which propositions can and cannot be dependent, and the differences between dependence and determination. Propositions do in fact turn out to be conceptually dependent on mind in virtue of their being the sorts of things that are essentially accessible, i.e. capable of being understood, believed, doubted, and so on. This fact, however, is not of the sort of ontological significance that is required for propositions to be ontologically dependent upon us in any of the ways originally suggested by some possible readings of minimalism.

In the subsequent chapter three we found, however, that the notions of conceptual dependence and conceptual truth were of instrumental value in validating the minimalist ontology offered by Stephen Schiffer of propositions as pleonastic entities. Propositions turn out to be precisely what we thought they were according to the core –abstract, necessary, mind- and language- independent entities that play precisely the sorts of roles we've asked them to. However, on the well- motivated minimalist analysis, their natures are wholly determined (in a way that should no longer even suggest that they are therefore also dependent on them) by our basic propositional linguistic practices. As a result of this fact, it follows that we can know all there is to know about what is essential to their natures simply by reflecting on these linguistic practices, and thus a minimalist

proposition ontology thus appears to avoid the problems of the Platonist, while both undermining any motivation for being anything like a Platonist, and leaving some rather embarrassing questions hanging for the reductionist to grapple with. In addition, on this view it is a conceptual truth that propositions exist, so we can know that they exist simply by reflecting on the trivially fulfilled conditions for successfully referring to them embedded in our propositional linguistic practices. Finally, these shadowy, insubstantial entities turn out nonetheless to be precisely the sorts of things we thought they were –or at least what we thought they were according to the core or common conception summarized in chapter one (minus the further Platonist insistence that propositions play any sort of relevant explanatory role), and such that we can derive their essential theoretical roles from the linguistic practices the minimalist holds to be constitutive of the natures.

But while minimalism seems to have a better way to deal with the epistemological worries associated with proposition ontology, and appropriately deflates the ontological issues of nature and existence, we seem to be left hanging with explanatory worries. And while each of the proposition ontologies, minimalism included, must deal with these, the deflationary results of becoming a minimalist, touted in chapter three, seem to have removed from the minimalists conception any resources for dealing successfully with these. For, I argued, at best, the minimalist can refer only to trivially existing propositions that play a role in uninformative dormitive virtue explanations. This raises the important questions about why we should, on the minimalist analysis of their natures, really care at all about whether propositions do in fact exist –perhaps raising the threat of motivating instead a fictionalist or instrumentalist account of propositions. We wanted

them to not only be knowable and tractable but to *do* something for us, and at least what this seemed to require is that they play a role in informative, substantive explanations of important facts. Minimalist propositions don't appear to be able to do this for us.

Finally, in chapter 4, I discussed two strategies for dealing with this problem, and finding a substantive relevance to the propositional linguistic practices so basic to the minimalist conception of them. One, which is suggested (although I am not suggesting that it is there endorsed or even intended) by a reading of Schiffer's *The Things We Mean*, is to claim that despite appearances, propositions do in fact play a non-trivial explanatory role in true accounts of human behavior and knowledge. While acknowledging the theoretical possibility of showing the relevance of our propositional linguistic practices in this way, I also motivated and sketched a deflationary alternative which grants the trivial and dormitive virtue nature of propositional explanations, but claims that it is the linguistic practices themselves, so important and fundamental to the minimalist analysis, that are useful, providing the means to say and think things not only convenient but perhaps even essential to our purposes, broadening the expressive power of our languages. But this pragmatism, in the end, in no way undermines the genuine existential-cum-referential ambitions of serious proposition talk, since, if the minimalist is right, our referential ambitions are satisfied just in case we talk the way most of us already do about content, truth, and so on. So, in the end, propositions do not do all that we thought they needed to do—at least they do not appear to be the robust sorts of explanatory entities we initially thought they had to be to validate proposition theory and proposition talk. But If I am right about the role of proposition talk itself, a pragmatist position undermines the need for them to do so; we ought to keep referring to



propositions simply in virtue of the usefulness of so talking. Propositions will continue to exist, as they always have, whether we do so or not. They won't do much for us, nor can they. But that's ok –we never really needed them to.

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