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Nominalism and Intentionality

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I

In one formulation, the problem of intentionality is presented as concerning a particular class of properties, intentional properties. Intentional properties are those properties expressed by predicates formed from verbs of propositional attitude. For example, the verb 'believe' can form the predicate 'believes that snow is white', and this predicate expresses the intentional property, believing that snow is white. Similarly, the verb 'desire' can form the predicate 'desires that grass be green', and this predicate expresses the intentional property, desiring that grass be green. Given this characterization of intentional properties, the problem of intentionality is then the problem of explaining how it is possible that physical objects—human beings, for example—can have intentional properties. Thus, if we were to consider particular cases—such as John’s believing that snow is white, or Mary’s desiring that grass be green—the problem is to explain how it is possible that physical objects, like John or Mary, can have the property of believing that snow is white, or the property of desiring that grass be green.

The first thing to notice about the problem in this formulation is perhaps that it is not so very clear that it is a problem. For the question ‘How is it possible that physical objects can have intentional properties?’ would not in general be raised unless it were assumed that there was some prima facie reason for thinking that something could not be both a physical object and have intentional properties. But it is not obvious that this assumption is true. After all, what exactly is the reason for thinking that a physical object cannot have an intentional property, and why is this reason so compelling that it gives rise to the problem of intentionality?

Philosophers suspicious of philosophical problems are inclined to take
this kind of consideration very seriously, and as a consequence are inclined
to think that there is no problem of intentionality. One such suspicious
philosopher is Stephen Schiffer, and in his book *Remnants of Meaning* and
in subsequent papers, he argues that “the questions which now define the
philosophy of language (and I use that rubric broadly to include questions
about intentionality) have false presuppositions” (1987: 271). In particular,
Schiffer argues, there really is no difficulty in a physical object’s having an
intentional property, and thus we have no need to face the problem of
intentionality.

What is interesting about Schiffer’s argument that there is no problem
of intentionality is that it does not come from the expected direction. It
is natural to expect that someone who wants to say that there is no
problem of intentionality would discuss what it is to be intentional and
what it is to be physical and argue that on a proper understanding of
these notions, there is no difficulty in a physical object’s having an inten-
tional property. Schiffer’s idea, however, is that whether or not there is
a problem of intentionality depends, not on the proper understanding of
what it is to be intentional or physical, but rather on what positions are
the correct ones in the metaphysics of properties. Schiffer argues that
there are two conceptions of what properties are—and hence two concep-
tions of what *intentional* properties are—and that only on what Schiffer
thinks of as the *incorrect* conception is there a difficulty in a physical
object’s having an intentional property. If one adopts what is for Schiffer
the *correct* conception of properties, then there is no difficulty, and
hence, no problem.

Schiffer’s strategy for avoiding the problem of intentionality is interest-
ing for a second reason as well. For while it is not obvious that the problem
of intentionality is a problem, it has normally been assumed that, for at
least one group of philosophers, it is, viz., physicalists. Physicalists hold
that intentional properties supervene on physical properties in the sense—
roughly—that for every intentional property there is some physical prop-
erty such that the instantiation of the latter is metaphysically sufficient for
the instantiation of the former. Given that it is not obvious that intentional
properties stand to physical properties in the necessary relations that su-
pervenience requires—and indeed, that there are substantial reasons to
doubt that intentional properties stand in such relations at all—it seems
that physicalists might well raise the question ‘How is it possible that physi-
cal objects have intentional properties?’ Schiffer himself is a physicalist,
but he thinks that physicalists have no more reason to face the problem of
intentionality than any other kind of philosopher. If physicalists attend to
the metaphysics of properties in the way that he recommends, then, Schif-
fers thinks, for physicalists as for everybody else, there will be no problem
of intentionality.
I will argue, however, that Schiffer's proposal that one might avoid the problem of intentionality if one adopts a particular conception of properties fails. I will not be concerned to argue that there is a problem of intentionality (or that there isn't). I will simply be concerned to show that Schiffer's remarks about the metaphysics of properties do not establish that there isn't a problem of intentionality, and, in fact, have no impact on that problem at all.

II

The first difference between Schiffer's two conceptions of properties emerges when we consider their contrasting accounts of certain claims about the existence and instantiation of properties. Thus, to adopt one of Schiffer's examples, to say that there is the intentional property of believing that flounders snore is, according to the first conception of properties which Schiffer considers—which he calls the non-pleonastic conception—to be committed to the existence of certain kind of entity, something which is "objective, abstract and eternal" (1987: 144), and something which bears only a contingent relation to the predicate 'believes that flounders snore'. As Schiffer puts it, according to the non-pleonastic conception, the property of believing that flounders snore is "as ontologically and conceptually distinct from the predicate 'believes that flounders snore' as Saul Kripke is from the name 'Saul Kripke' " (1987: 144). Moreover, according to the non-pleonastic conception, to say that someone—Ralph, in Schiffer's example—has the property of believing that flounders snore is to say that Ralph stands in a particular relation to this objective abstract and eternal property.

In contrast, according to the other conception of properties that Schiffer considers—which he calls the pleonastic conception—to say that there is the property of believing that flounders snore is not to say that there is something objective, abstract, and eternal; it is only to say that there is the predicate 'believes that flounders snore'. Moreover, to say that Ralph has the property of believing that flounders snore is not to assert a relation between Ralph and an abstract entity; it is merely to say that the predicate 'believes that flounders snore' is true of Ralph.

The first difference between the two conceptions of properties that Schiffer considers, then, concerns the way in which we speak of properties: according to the non-pleonastic conception, to speak of properties is to speak of abstract entities; according to the pleonastic conception, to speak of properties is to speak only of predicates. The second difference emerges when we consider the truth conditions of the sentence:

(1) Ralph believes that flounders snore.
According to the non-pleonastic conception, the truth of this sentence inevitably involves the existence of the objective abstract and eternal property of believing that flounders snore. For according to this conception, the truth of (1) involves a relation between the thing denoted by the name ‘Ralph’, namely Ralph, and the thing expressed by the predicate ‘believes that flounders snore’, namely, the objective, abstract and eternal property of believing that flounders snore. In particular, (1) is true if and only if Ralph instantiates this objective, abstract and eternal property.

In contrast, according to pleonastic conception, there is no abstract property of believing that flounders snore. A fortiori, Ralph could not have this property. Do we then conclude that, on the pleonastic conception, (1) is false or is neither true nor false? No. According to the pleonastic conception, sentences such as (1) do not involve commitment of properties in the non-pleonastic conception. Rather, (1) is true if and only if the predicate ‘believes that flounders snore’ is true of Ralph. From the point of view of the pleonastic conception, the predicate ‘believes that flounders snore’ can be true of Ralph even if there is no abstract property of believing that flounders snore, and thus (1) can be true in the absence of that property.6

The second difference between the two conceptions of properties, then, emerges when we consider their contrasting accounts of the truth conditions of ordinary sentences such as (1). The pleonastic conception of properties asserts not only that to speak of properties is to speak merely of predicates; it also asserts that sentences such as ‘Ralph believes that flounders snore’ are true just in case ‘believes that flounders snore’ are true of Ralph. On the other hand, the non-pleonastic conception asserts not only that to speak of properties is to speak of abstract entities; it also asserts that the truth of sentences such as ‘Ralph believes that flounders snore’ inevitably involves the existence of such entities.

We can summarize the difference between the pleonastic and the non-pleonastic conceptions by considering their differing answers to the question ‘What makes it the case that ‘believes that flounders snore’ is true of Ralph?’ According to the non-pleonastic conception, what makes it the case that ‘believes that flounders snore’ is true of Ralph is (a) that there is the property of believing that flounders snore; (b) that this property is expressed by ‘believes that flounders snore’; and (c) that Ralph instantiates this property. By contrast, according to the pleonastic conception, there is no property of believing that flounders snore which makes it the case that ‘believes that flounders snore’ is true of Ralph. Rather, this predicate simply is true of Ralph, and that is all there is to be said on the matter.7

Now Schiffer argues that on neither conception of intentional properties is there a problem of intentionality. I suggest that we can best state his argument if we first consider a thesis which explicitly connects the idea that
physical objects have intentional properties with there being a problem of intentionality:

(I) There is a problem of intentionality if and only if physical objects can have intentional properties.

Given Schiffer's distinction between the two conceptions of properties, it follows that (I) admits of two interpretations, depending on whether the claim that physical objects have intentional properties is to be interpreted according to the non-pleonastic conception of properties, or according to the pleonastic conception. Schiffer thinks that (I) is true under the non-pleonastic interpretation, and false under the pleonastic interpretation. But, he thinks, in either case one can derive the conclusion that there is no problem of intentionality.

Let us first suppose that the claim that physical objects can have intentional properties is to be interpreted according to the non-pleonastic conception of properties—we might put this by saying that physical objects can non-pleonastically have intentional properties. Then we have the following interpretation of (I), which we can call (I-np):

(I-np) There is a problem of intentionality if and only if physical objects can non-pleonastically have intentional properties.

With the help of (I-np), the first part of Schiffer's argument to the claim that there is no problem of intentionality can be stated very simply. For Schiffer thinks that:

(I-np) is true

But he also thinks that the right hand side of (I-np) is false. For Schiffer agrees with the pleonastic conception that there are no properties at all, it follows, of course, that there are no intentional properties either, and thus it follows that:

It is not the case that physical objects can non-pleonastically have intentional properties.

But of course, if (I-np) is true, and if physical objects cannot non-pleonastically have intentional properties, it follows that there is no problem of intentionality.

Alternatively, let us suppose that the claim that physical objects can have intentional properties is interpreted according to the pleonastic conception of properties—we might put this by saying that physical objects can
merely pleonastically have intentional properties. Then we have an interpretation of (I) which we might call (I-p):

(I-p) There is a problem of intentionality if and only if physical objects can merely pleonastically have intentional properties.

With the help of (I-p), the second part of Schiffer's argument can also be stated simply. For, as I understand him, Schiffer holds that:

(I-p) is false.

For Schiffer rejects the non-pleonastic conception of properties, but endorses the pleonastic conception. Moreover, on that conception, he agrees that physical objects have intentional properties. He endorses, then, the claim that:

Physical objects can merely pleonastically have intentional properties.

But of course, if (I-p) is false, physical objects can merely pleonastically have intentional properties, it again follows that there is no problem of intentionality.

In sum, Schiffer's is a two part argument. It begins with the idea that there are two conceptions of properties, the pleonastic and the non-pleonastic. On the non-pleonastic conception of properties, (I-np) is true, but physical objects cannot have intentional properties; it follows that there is no problem of intentionality. On the pleonastic conception of properties, (I-p) is false, but physical objects can have intentional properties; it again follows that there is no problem of intentionality.

Now there are clearly a number of different ways that one could respond to this argument. One might, for example, criticise the distinction Schiffer draws between the pleonastic and non-pleonastic conceptions of properties. If there were no such distinction, or if the distinction were less clear than Schiffer supposes, then his argument would collapse, for it is crucial to his argument that there are two clearly different interpretations of (I). Alternatively, one might argue that Schiffer is mistaken to be a nominalist, to deny that there are any properties in the non-pleonastic conception. If nominalism in general were mistaken, it would become less obvious why one should deny that physical objects can non-pleonastically have intentional properties. But if physical objects non-pleonastically did have intentional properties, then Schiffer's argument collapses, for he concides that if they did then there would be a problem of intentionality; it is just that he thinks they don't, so there isn't.

But I want to pursue a different strategy. Instead of concentrating on
Schiffer's distinction between the pleonastic and non-pleonastic conceptions of properties, or on the correctness of nominalism, I want to take up the following question: if we suppose that there is a problem of intentionality on the condition that physical objects non-pleonastically have intentional properties, is there any good reason to suppose that there is not a problem of intentionality on the condition that physical objects merely pleonastically have intentional properties? I will argue that there is no good reason to suppose this, and thus, contrary to Schiffer's argument, the question of whether physical objects non-pleonastically have intentional properties, or whether they merely pleonastically have intentional properties, is irrelevant to the question of whether there is a problem of intentionality.

III

Let me begin by considering thesis (I) and its two interpretations, (I-np) and (I-p). It is crucial to Schiffer's argument that (I-np) is true while (I-p) is false. But the first thing to be said in response to this is that, prima facie anyway, whatever reason there is to be invoked in support of (I-np), there is a parallel reason to be invoked in support of (I-p).

After all, what would be the reason for thinking that (I-np) is true? One would think that (I-np) is true, I suggest, if one thinks that there is some difficulty in the idea of a physical object's non-pleonastically having an intentional property, a difficulty which would give rise to the problem of intentionality. If there were such a difficulty, then, from the assumption that physical objects did non-pleonastically have intentional properties, it could be concluded that there is a problem of intentionality.\textsuperscript{11}

Let us suppose then that there is some difficulty in the idea of a physical object's non-pleonastically having an intentional property. Prima facie, it is very hard to see why there should not also be a difficulty in the idea of a physical object's merely pleonastically having an intentional property. After all, to say that physical objects merely pleonastically have intentional properties is to say that intentional predicates are true of physical objects. But why should the shift from properties to predicates make any difference? On the assumption that there is a difficulty in the idea of Ralph's non-pleonastically having the property of believing that flounders snore it is natural to think that there should also be a difficulty in the idea of the predicate 'believes that flounders snore' being true of Ralph. In fact, it is reasonable to suppose that whatever it is that makes trouble for the one will make trouble for the other. In short, then, and contra Schiffer's argument, if we suppose that (I-np) is true, there seems every reason to suppose that (I-p) is true as well.

It might be replied that this all depends on what the difficulty is in the idea of a physical object's non-pleonastically having an intentional prop-
ertainty. Presumably some difficulties will survive the transition from non-pleonastic to pleonastic and others won't. This is of course true; but I do not think it affects the fact that there is no prima facie reason to think that Schiffer's argument will be successful. For it is important to point out that the difficulty that Schiffer himself finds in the idea of a physical object's having an intentional property seems precisely the sort of difficulty that remains unaffected by the distinction between the pleonastic and non-pleonastic conceptions of properties.

For Schiffer, the difficulty has its source in the possibility that intentional properties are irreducible, that is, in the possibility that there are no physical properties to which intentional properties are reducible. On the one hand, Schiffer thinks, it is hard to see how intentional properties can be reduced to physical properties. On the other hand, he thinks, it is also hard to see how physical objects can have intentional properties if these properties are not so reducible to physical properties. The upshot is that there is a difficulty in seeing how physical objects can have intentional properties at all. And this is the difficulty which leads Schiffer to think that if physical objects non-pleonastically had intentional properties, then there would be a problem of intentionality.

Now Schiffer of course might be right or wrong to find difficulty in the idea of a physical object's having an irreducible mental property. Regardless of whether he is right or wrong however, it difficult to see why the idea that irreducible mental predicates are true of physical objects should be any less troublesome than the idea that physical objects have irreducible mental properties. And this suggests again that, prima facie, there is no reason to suppose that (I-np) is true while at the same time supposing that (I-p) is false.

IV

So far, then, I have suggested that while we might grant to Schiffer that there are two interpretations of (I), there appears no prima facie reason to grant to him that (I) is true under one of these interpretations—the interpretation expressed by (I-np)—but false under the other—the interpretation expressed by (I-p). Schiffer thinks that (I-np) is true because he thinks there is a difficulty in a physical object's having an irreducible intentional property. But if there is such a difficulty, there would prima facie be a parallel difficulty in an irreducible intentional predicate being true of a physical object.

I want now to examine in more detail the question of reductionism. We have seen that Schiffer thinks that there is difficulty in the idea of a physical object's having an irreducible mental property, but that there is no parallel difficulty in the idea of an irreducible mental predicate being true of a
physical object. However, why does Schiffer think this? What, after all, is the problem that Schiffer finds in a physical object’s having an irreducible mental property, and why does he think there no parallel problem in an irreducible mental predicate’s being true of a physical object?

Schiffer’s argument for reductionism appeals to considerations of mental causation. Schiffer invites us first to agree that sentences of the form:

(a) Ava stepped back because she believed that a car was coming

are, if true at all, always true in conjunction with a sentence drawn from a different class of sentences, namely sentences of the form:

(b) Ava stepped back because she was in neural state N.

Schiffer then says that, regardless of one’s metaphysical commitments concerning properties, one must explain how it is that, if a sentence such as (a) is true, there is always a sentence such as (b) which is true as well. We might put this more briefly by saying that, regardless of one’s metaphysical commitments, one must explain the joint truth of (a) and (b).

Now, Schiffer argues that the only way for the friend of the non-pleonastic conception of properties to explain this fact—the fact of the joint truth of (a) and (b)—is to suppose that the property of believing that a car was coming is reducible to the property of being in neural state N. Schiffer draws the conclusion from this that the friend of the non-pleonastic conception of properties must agree that if a physical object has an intentional property, that property must be reducible to a physical property.

Now one can certainly imagine reasons to be sceptical about this line of argument. However, let us set such reasons aside. The important point for our purposes is not whether Schiffer’s argument for reductionism is sound, but rather whether the same line of reasoning will go through if one is working with the pleonastic conception of properties. Schiffer thinks not. In particular, he thinks there are at least two explanations of the joint truth of (a) and (b) which do not amount to reductionism, which are available to a friend of the pleonastic conception of properties, but which were not available to the friend of the non-pleonastic conception.

The first of these—which I will call the happy coincidence view—is the view that “it is simply a happy coincidence that (a) and (b) are true together” (187: 173); that is, that it is just a coincidence that every time a sentence such as (a) is true, there is a sentence such as (b) which is true as well. Now this happy coincidence view is an extremely odd position. After all, can it really be mere good luck that we are in a world in which every time it is true that someone stepped back because she saw a car coming, it is
also true that she stepped back because she was in a particular neural state? 
That kind of coincidence is surely altogether too happy to be a coincidence.

Schiffer agrees that the happy coincidence view is implausible for the 
friend of the non-pleonastic conception of properties, but he suggests the 
situation is different for the friend of the pleonastic conception. According 
to Schiffer, if we understand “the genesis of propositional attitudes and 
propositional attitude concepts” this will “remove . . . what threatens to be 
an ontological mystery” (1987: 170). In referring to the “genesis of proposi-
tional attitude concepts”, Schiffer means, I think, to refer to what he takes 
to be what is most important about these concepts, namely that they enter 
into what he calls a “reliable predictive practice” (1991: 14). Amplifying on 
this idea, Schiffer says:

it is constitutive of our propositional attitude concepts that when we believe 
that a person has certain beliefs and desires, and certain other (not readily 
articulable) conditions obtain, then we form expectations about what the person 
will do and about the reason for which he or she will do it. (1987: 172)

On the basis of these expectations, we find ourselves “in a position to 
reliably predict someone’s behaviour on the basis of propositional attitudes 
we ascribe to him” (1991: 14). In short, Schiffer seems to suggest that once 
it is acknowledged that our central purpose in ascribing propositional atti-
dutes is to explain and predict the behaviour of others then the “ontological 
mystery” of the joint truth of the sentences (a) and (b) will vanish, and the way 
will be clear for the view that it is just a happy coincidence that these two sentences are true together.

But this suggestion is shot through with difficulties. First, it is completely 
unclear how the mere fact that we engage in a reliable predictive practice 
when we ascribe propositional attitudes to people has any bearing on the 
plausibility of the happy coincidence view. Schiffer is certainly correct that 
we engage in this practice. After all, this merely means that we have certain 
goals in asserting intentional sentences, and that we have a legitimate 
confidence in achieving those goals. However, whatever our goals are in 
asserting intentional sentences, those sentences nonetheless might be true. 
And if they are true, we will still want to know how their truth bears on the 
truth of various non-intentional sentences. For example, suppose it is my 
purpose to explain and predict Ava’s behaviour when I say ‘Ava believes 
there is a car coming’; suppose, that is, that I am engaging in a reliable 
predictive practice when I assert this sentence of Ava. Even so, the sen-
tence may be true. And, if it is true, we will want to know how the truth of 
that sentence bears on the truth of various other sentences, such as, for 
example, ‘Ava is in neural state N’. To suggest that these sentences are true 
together by coincidence does not seem like much of an answer. Second,
even if Schiffer's point that we engage in a reliable predictive practice somehow bestowed credibility on the happy coincidence view, it is unclear what role the distinction he draws between the two conceptions of properties plays in all this. After all, why can a friend of the non-pleonastic conception of properties not also appeal to the idea that our practice of attributing attitudes is a reliable predictive practice?

Furthermore, there is an independent problem with Schiffer's idea that the friend of the pleonastic conception of properties might appeal to the happy coincidence explanation of the joint truth of (a) and (b). As I noted at the outset, Schiffer promises, among other things, to show that physicalists have no need to face the problem of intentionality, that one can be a physicalist without worrying about the problem of intentionality. However, it is quite obvious that the happy coincidence view is not a form of physicalism. A minimal form of physicalism must respect the supervenience of the intentional on the physical. But the happy coincidence view violates supervenience. Suppose again that it is just a coincidence that 'believes that flounders snore' and 'is in such and such a neural state' are both true of Ralph. Then it follows that there is a possible world in which every physical sentence true in our world is true, but that 'believes that flounder snore' is true of nothing, and therefore not true of Ralph. This latter possibility is allowed by the happy coincidence view, but is inconsistent with physicalism. And again, there is no reason to think that this violation of physicalism is affected by a pleonastic interpretation or by a non-pleonastic interpretation of the properties involved.

There doesn't seem much, then, to the suggestion that the friend of the pleonastic conception can appeal to the happy coincidence view to avoid Schiffer's causal argument for reduction while the friend of the non-pleonastic conception cannot. First, the happy coincidence view is not a very good explanation of the joint truth of (a) and (b), so it is unclear that the happy coincidence view avoids the argument for reduction. Second—and this point is the more important one for our purposes—even if the happy coincidence view did avoid the argument for reduction, the view is available to a friend of either conception of properties. In short, the happy coincidence view is not a particularly happy view.

However, Schiffer suggests that there is also a second explanation of the joint truth of

(a) Ava stepped back because she believed that there was a car coming

and

(b) Ava stepped back because she was in neural state N
which is unavailable to the friend of the non-pleonastic conception, but is available to a friend of the pleonastic conception. This is the view that the truth of (a) supervenes on the truth of (b) but is not reducible to it. Let us call this the supervenience without reduction view.\textsuperscript{13}

Schiffer argues that the supervenience without reduction view is unavailable to the friend of the non-pleonastic conception. He remarks that, if one accepts the thesis there are properties, the supervenience without reduction view is "obscurantist in the extreme" (1987: 154), and compares the view to G.E. Moore's idea that moral properties supervene on natural properties without being reduced to them:

How could being told that non-natural moral properties stood in the supervenience relation to physical properties make them any more palatable? On the contrary, invoking a special primitive metaphysical relation of supervenience to explain how moral properties were related to physical properties was just to add mystery to mystery, to cover one obscurantist move with another. I therefore find it more than a little ironic, and puzzling, that supervenience is nowadays being heralded as a way of making non-pleonastic, irreducibly non-natural intentional properties coherent with an acceptably naturalistic solution to the mind-body problem. (1987: 153–4)

On the other hand, continues Schiffer, the supervenience without reduction view is available to the friend of the pleonastic conception of properties. In particular, he says (1987: 165), once one rejects the non-pleonastic conception of properties, one can endorse this "mild enough supervenience claim":

(S) Given that Ava believes that a car is coming toward her, she also believes this in every possible world that is physically indistinguishable from the actual world.

Given the truth of supervenience theses such as (S), one might easily explain how, whenever a sentence such as (a) is true a sentence such as (b) is true as well. And thus, Schiffer concludes, (1987: 166) one can "answer the charge that an argument can be launched against [my view] that parallels the one against nonpleonastic irreducible belief properties."

I think there are serious reasons to doubt that supervenience claims of the form (S)—which Jaegwon Kim calls global supervenience claims—provide on their own a reasonable answer to the problem of explaining the joint truth of (a) and (b).\textsuperscript{14} Once again, however, let us set such worries aside. The important point for our purposes is not whether (S) and its ilk provide a serious answer to the question of the joint truth of (a) and (b); the important point is to see whether Schiffer is right that (S) is not open to the very same charges that were levelled against supervenience claims that a friend of the non-pleonastic conception of properties might make.
But once again, it is very hard to see how Schiffer could be right that it is not. In the first place, it is quite mistaken to suppose that (S) is not available to the friend of the non-pleonastic conception of properties. Schiffer says that (S) “eschew[s]” properties (1987: 165), thereby suggesting that the friend of the non-pleonastic conception might not advance a supervenience claim such as (S). But in fact (S) does not eschew properties. On the contrary, (S) is neutral about the existence of properties, since it admits of both a pleonastic and a non-pleonastic reading. Moreover, there is no reason to think that the variety of supervenience claim that one adopts must be dictated by what metaphysical approach to properties one finds congenial. In short, if one likes global supervenience claims such as (S) one can have them—even if one also likes the non-pleonastic conception of properties.

Second, there is no reason to suppose that supervenience claims such as (S) are immune to the criticisms Schiffer levels against other supervenience claims. Schiffer says that it piles mystery on mystery to suppose that there is a “primitive form of entailment” (1987:153) between physical properties and intentional properties of the kind required by supervenience without supposing that intentional properties are reducible to physical properties. But that kind of remark is perfectly applicable in the case of (S). For consider Ava. According to (S), if Ava is in a world physically indistinguishable from this one, then, as a matter of necessity, she believes that a car is coming. In other words, Ava’s being in a world physically indistinguishable from this one entails that she believes that there is a car coming. Schiffer wants to argue that, in spite of this, (S) does not imply that intentional properties pleonastically interpreted are reduced to physical properties pleonastically interpreted. But why is this proposal not to pile mystery on mystery when an exactly parallel proposal, according to Schiffer, is?

As far as Schiffer’s argument for reductionism goes, then, the supervenience without reduction view is on all fours with the happy coincidence view. Both are available to friends of both conceptions of properties, and neither are attractive as accounts of the joint truth of (a) and (b). More generally, and to return to the main line of argument, Schiffer is mistaken to suppose that there is any less of a problem with irreducible mental predicates than there is with irreducible mental properties. If the Schiffer’s argument for reductionism is sound, there is as much a problem with irreducible properties as there is with irreducible predicates.

VI

To this point, my concern has been with the theses (I-np) and (I-p). Schiffer thinks that (I-np) is true because he thinks that there is a difficulty with irreducible mental properties, a difficulty that arises from considerations of
mental causation. On the other hand, Schiffer thinks that (I-p) is false because he thinks that there is no parallel difficulty with irreducible mental predicates. As against this, however, we have seen that there is no reason to accept that (I-np) and (I-p) differ in truth value. To the extent that considerations of mental causation drive us to reductionism in non-pleonastic case, they drive us to reductionism in the pleonastic case; moreover, to the extent that difficulties about reductionism give rise to the problem of intentionality in one case, they give rise to that problem in the other.

I want now to turn to a different part of Schiffer's argument for there not being a problem of intentionality: the premise that it is not the case that physical objects non-pleonastically have intentional properties. One of Schiffer's arguments for this premise is nominalism, and I have already sworn off any discussion of the correctness of nominalism. But Schiffer has a second argument for this premise, and this second argument is relevant to the question we have set for ourselves, namely, whether the distinction between pleonastic and non-pleonastic is relevant to the problem of intentionality.

The argument derives once again from Schiffer's concerns about the irreducibility of intentional properties. To establish that intentional properties are reducible to physical properties, Schiffer thinks, it would be necessary to state in physical terms necessary and sufficient conditions for a physical object to have an intentional property; however, to demand that this be done is an "invitation to do the impossible" (1987:179). Schiffer summarizes this by saying that, if there are intentional properties, those properties are not reducible to physical properties.

On the other hand, the idea that physical objects have irreducibly intentional properties is, as Schiffer puts it, "not merely obscurantist but magical" (1987:11), and to suppose that physical objects have irreducibly intentional properties is to "renounce the scruples of the natural scientist", and, in Quine's words which Schiffer quotes with approval, to "just surface listlessly to the Sargasso Sea of mentalism" (1987:142). Schiffer summarizes this point by saying that, if there are intentional properties, those properties are reducible to physical properties.

These two points yield the following argument, which we can call the property argument:

(i) If there are intentional properties, those properties are not reducible to physical properties.
(ii) If there are intentional properties, those properties are reducible to physical properties.

Therefore,

(iii) There are no intentional properties.
If this argument is sound, we clearly have a very good reason to believe Schiffer’s premise that it is not the case that physical objects non-pleonastically have intentional properties. For if there are no intentional properties, then it’s not the case that physical objects non-pleonastically have such properties.

What is important for our purposes, however, is not the soundness of the property argument so much as whether it is possible to construct an analogous and equally sound argument consistently with the pleonastic conception of properties. This analogous argument would be exactly like the property argument except that the word ‘predicate’ is substituted for the word ‘property’ throughout:

(i*) If there are intentional predicates, those predicates are not reducible to physical predicates.
(ii*) If there are intentional predicates, those predicates are reducible to physical predicates.

Therefore,

(iii*) There are no intentional predicates.

Let us call this argument the predicate argument to distinguish it from the original property argument. Of course Schiffer thinks the property argument is sound. But then our question is the following: if we suppose that property argument is sound, is there any reason to suppose that predicate argument is unsound?

The question is very important for Schiffer’s argument against there being a problem of intentionality. For let us suppose that the both the property and the predicate argument were sound. Then we could derive the conclusion, not only that there are no intentional properties, but also that there are no intentional predicates. But it was no part of Schiffer’s plan to deny that there are intentional predicates. Quite the contrary, Schiffer asserts that some intentional predicates are true of physical objects. For example, he thinks that ‘believes that flounders snore’ is—or might be—true of Ralph. Indeed, it was an assumption of the argument I set out in section II that physical objects merely pleonastically have intentional predicates, that is, that intentional predicates are true of physical objects.

Schiffer thinks there is no reason to suppose that the predicate argument is sound in part because of the considerations from mental causation that we discussed in the previous section. Schiffer thinks these considerations support the second premise of the property argument, but do not similarly support the second premise of the predicate argument. As we have seen, however, there is no reason to suppose that Schiffer is right to think this.

But Schiffer has a second reason for thinking that the predicate argument is unsound while the property argument is sound. He thinks that the conclu-
sion of the predicate argument—the denial that there are intentional predicates—is absurd while the conclusion of the property argument is not absurd. "What is the opposite number of the argument now that only belief predicates are at issue? it could hardly be that there are no belief predicates!" (1987:166).

But it is difficult to see how Schiffer could be right about this. If by 'intentional predicate'—or, in Schiffer's phrase, 'belief predicate'—you mean sounds in the air and marks on a page, then of course one cannot deny that there are intentional predicates. However, one might very well deny of those sounds and marks that they are intentional predicates; one might very well deny, that is, that these sounds and marks are expressions literally true or false of physical objects. In that sense, one might very well deny that there are intentional predicates. Indeed, this is a denial with precedent. Gilbert Ryle adopts just such a position in The Concept of Mind when he says that sentences such as 'John Doe knows French' are "neither reports of observed or observable states of affairs, nor yet reports of unobserved or unobservable states of affairs." I take it that what Ryle meant by this is that expressions such as 'John Doe knows French' are not declarative sentences which are true or false. The same position might be expressed by saying that expressions like 'believes that flounders snore' are not predicates which are true or false of physical objects.

Now it might be replied that Ryle's non-factualist view that expressions like 'believes that flounders snore' are not predicates which are true or false of physical objects is, if perhaps not absurd, then extremely unattractive, and thus that if the predicate argument yields non-factualism as a conclusion, then that argument must be resisted. But the response to this is simply that the conclusion of the property argument is just as unattractive as Rylean non-factualism. Let us suppose that we accept that the property argument is sound, and therefore arrive at the view that there are no intentional properties. Then, if the non-pleonastic conception of properties is right, we must conclude that all sentences of the form 'Ralph believes that flounders snore' are false, or at least are not true. For, according to the non-pleonastic conception, what makes it the case that a sentence such as 'Ralph believes that flounders snore' is true is that Ralph instantiates the property expressed by 'believes that flounder snore'. But of course if there is no such property, then Ralph cannot instantiate it, and the sentence is false. I take it that this kind of error theory is just as unattractive as the Rylean non-factualist view that there are no intentional predicates which are true or false of physical objects.

In sum, if the predicate argument is sound, it results in non-factualism; on the other hand, if the property argument is sound it results in the error theory. These are different positions; but I do not think that they are different enough to support Schiffer's contention that the conclusion of the
predicate argument is absurd, while the conclusion of property argument is not. More generally, if we agree with Schiffer that the property argument is sound and conclude with him that it is not the case that physical object’s non-pleonastically have intentional properties, we should equally think that the predicate argument is sound and conclude that it is not the case that physical object’s merely pleonastically have intentional properties. However, if we do that, then Schiffer’s argument collapses.

VI

I began by distinguishing two halves of Schiffer’s argument for the conclusion that there is no problem of intentionality. The first half was that the thesis (I) is true under one interpretation—the interpretation expressed by (I-np)—but that it is not the case than physical objects non-pleonastically have intentional properties; the second half was that the thesis (I) is false under another interpretation—the interpretation expressed by (I-p)—but that it is the case that physical objects merely pleonastically have intentional properties. I have been arguing that there is no way to fit the two halves of this argument together. For one thing, whatever reason there may be for thinking that (I-np) is true, there is parallel reason for think that (I-p) is true too. For another, one of Schiffer’s main arguments for the conclusion that it is not the case that physical objects non-pleonastically have intentional properties—the property argument—also yields the conclusion that it is not the case that physical objects merely pleonastically have intentional properties. Hence, if we believe one of Schiffer’s premises on the basis of the property argument, we are obliged to give up another of his premises.

I want now to close the paper by considering a somewhat more general issue that is raised by our discussion. There is—as we have noted—a problem of intentionality only if there is a difficulty in the idea of a physical object’s having an intentional property. I have been concentrating on the difficulty Schiffer perceives in the idea of physical object’s having an intentional property—the difficulty having to do with reductionism—and have argued that the distinction between the pleonastic and non-pleonastic conception is irrelevant to this difficulty. This difficulty about intentional and physical properties remains, regardless of what conception of properties is invoked, and so the distinction between these conceptions of properties is irrelevant to the problem of intentionality.

One might wonder, however, whether there is another difficulty in the idea of a physical object’s having a intentional property, a difficulty on which Schiffer’s distinction may be supposed to have an impact. And I think there is. Quite independently of the property argument, one might be disposed to reason as follows. It is just sordid semantics (it might be ar-
gued) to think that, corresponding to the meaningful expressions ‘is red’ and ‘believes that flounders snore’, there are the properties being red and believing that flounders snore. And it is just mysterious metaphysics (it might be continued) to suppose that these properties stand in the instantiation relation to physical objects. After all, what is the instantiation relation? Is it a two-place property, corresponding to the English word ‘have’? If it is, how does the instantiation relation itself get instantiated? One might think, then, quite generally, that there is a difficulty in the idea of physical objects having intentional properties not so much because the objects are physical and the properties intentional, but simply because the objects are objects and properties properties, and because the whole idea that objects have properties—I mean any objects and any properties—is a confusion.

I think it should be granted that, if this is your concern, then the pleonastic conception of properties might help you; at least it should be granted that, if this is your concern, then conceivably the distinction between the pleonastic and non-pleonastic conceptions of properties is relevant to your problem. But the trouble here is that it is very difficult to see why this kind of consideration has any bearing on the problem of intentionality. That there is a problem of intentionality presupposes that there is a difficulty in the idea of a physical object’s having a intentional property, but the difficulty in question can hardly be that the notion of instantiation is obscure. That difficulty does not distinguish the problem of intentionality from a perfectly general metaphysical problem about properties, namely, the problem how it is possible that, in general, objects can instantiate properties. But one can raise this perfectly general problem without mentioning intentional properties, or even the mind, at all. One need simply ask ‘How it is possible that a physical object can have a physical property?’ But surely, if there is a problem of intentionality, that problem must of necessity involve the mind! It follows that if there is a reason for finding difficulty in the idea of a physical object’s having a intentional property, and if that reason gives rise to the problem of intentionality, it cannot be the reason that, in general, it is hard to see how objects instantiate properties.

And here, I think, we arrive at a general characterization of Schiffer’s mistake in supposing that very abstract issues in the metaphysics of properties have an impact on the problem of intentionality. To decide to present the problem of intentionality as a problem about intentional properties is to decide to formulate the problem within a particular metaphysical framework, the framework of properties. Whether to hold a pleonastic or a non-pleonastic conception of properties is, I think, an important question: it is a question about whether to adopt the framework of properties. And whether there is a problem of intentionality is also an important question: it is a question about whether an apparent problem, a problem formulable
within the framework of properties, and quite possibly formulable within other frameworks, really is, all things considered, a genuine problem. But these two questions are quite independent of each other: a question about the framework of properties is one thing; a question about a problem formulable within that framework is quite another.¹⁹

Notes

¹An example of a philosopher who understands the problem of intentionality to be a problem of this form is Jerry Fodor. He remarks "What's wanted — for the geological properties as well as the psychological properties — is just that we be able to understand how purely physical things can have them." See Fodor 1991, p. 81.


³For an example of this kind of argument, see Tim Crane and D. H. Mellor 1991.

⁴According to Fodor, the "deepest motivation" for the problem of intentionality comes "from a certain ontological intuition: that there is no place for intentional categories in a physicalistic view of the world." See Fodor 1987, p. 97.

⁵I ignore here the problem of saying what, on the non-pleonastic conception, properties are, and what, on the non-pleonastic conception, the instantiation of a property by an object comes to. The important points for our purposes will simply be that, on the non-pleonastic conception, properties are distinct from predicates, and the instantiation relation is a distinct relation from the relation of being true of. For discussion of these issues see David Armstrong 1978 Vol. I, as well as David Lewis 1983.

⁶Schiffer's pleonastic conception of properties as I have presented it is most similar to the version of nominalism which Armstrong calls 'predicate nominalism'. See Armstrong 1978, p. 13. I do not mean to suggest, however, that there are not other ways to interpret what Schiffer says concerning the metaphysics of properties. Indeed, I do not think that Schiffer himself is entirely clear on which of a number of possible views he intends. Predicate nominalism seems plausibly attributed to Schiffer in those parts of *Remnants of Meaning* that deal with the questions of physicalism and reduction that I want to focus on. In other parts of *Remnants*, however, Schiffer suggests somewhat tentatively that one might appeal to substitutional quantification to provide an analysis of (1) that avoids commitment to properties; such a view would apparently differ from the one in the text in that it would not paraphrase (1) into (2). (This substitutional quantification suggestion is repudiated in later papers. See Schiffer 1994, and Tonnemar 1990 for discussion.) A third possibility is to understand the pleonastic conception of properties as analogous to contemporary deflationary theories of truth, properties and facts. However, as Paul Horwich pointed out to me, these latter theories tend to be weaker than the pleonastic conception of properties since they do not attempt to analyze talk of properties into talk of predicates. For our purposes, however, it is sufficient to focus exclusively on the version of nominalism discussed in the text. First, predicate nominalism has the advantage of being a rather clear and frank version of nominalism. Second, and more important, the existence of other versions nominalism (or deflationism) does not. I think, affect the main point I wish to make, which is that nominalism or deflationism in general cannot make the problem of intentionality disappear. For a recent defence of the deflationary theory of truth, see, Horwich 1990; for deflationary theories of facts and properties, see Horwich 1993, as well as Schiffer, 1987, ch. 6, for a discussion of the relation between the deflationary theory of truth and the problem of intentionality, see Boghossian 1990, and Devitt 1990; for a discussion of the relation between the deflationary theory of truth and the problem of linguistic meaning, see Johnston 1988.

⁷The example of Ralph concerns an intentional property, the property of believing that fountains snore. And it is properties of this kind that are important in connection with the problem of intentionality. However, it should not be thought that either the pleonastic or the non-pleonastic conception of properties is a view about intentional properties alone and is not a view about non-intentional properties. Rather, Schiffer intends both conceptions to be quite general accounts of the existence of properties, and of what it means to say that an object has a certain
property. Thus, to adopt another of Schiffer’s examples, what goes for there being the property of believing that flounders snore goes also for there being the property of being humble, and what goes for ‘Ralph believes that flounders snore’ also goes for ‘Mother Theresa is humble’.

For example: “I do not recognize any nonpleonastic properties. . . . I favor nominalism across the board, and especially do not think that properties are needed as the semantic values of predicates” (1987:143). For further discussion, see 1987: 234–5.

I am assuming here that it is part of the pleonastic conception of properties that if an object pleonastically has properties then it is not the case that the object non-pleonastically has properties—hence the ‘merely’ in the statement of (T-op).

For examples of this line of criticism, at least as applied to intentional properties, see Fodor 1991 and Kim Sterelny’s (1989) review of Remnants of Meaning.

Strictly speaking, this kind of consideration provides support only for one half of (T-op), the half that says that the fact that physical objects have intentional properties entails the fact that there is a problem of intentionality. This complication does not matter, I think, to the point I want to make.

For some of these reasons, see Antony 1991.

The supervenience without reduction view of the joint truth of (a) and (b) is obviously incompatible with the happy coincidence view, so the question arises: Which view does Schiffer himself support? The answer is: both at different times. In Remnants of Meaning he supports the happy coincidence view (p.73). In later papers, however, he supports supervenience. See: Schiffer 1991b p.185.

The problem with (S) is as follows. (S) applies only to worlds that are physically indistinguishable from ours, and is completely silent about worlds that are physically distinguishable. However, there are worlds that are physically distinguishable from ours, but in the most trivial ways. Let us suppose that, in our world, Wa, there is a pebble on the moon located in a certain position. Now consider another world, Wp, physically exactly like ours but one difference: this pebble is located two inches from position it occupies in our world. Wp is physically distinguishable from our world. However, if Wp is physically distinguishable from ours, it is consistent with (S), that, in Wp, Ava does not believe that there is a car coming. Indeed, it is consistent with (S) that no-one has any beliefs at all! For this kind of criticism of global supervenience claims, see Kim 1993, p.85.

Schiffer’s confidence that it is impossible to provide in physical terms necessary and sufficient conditions for a physical object to have a mental property derives in part from his arguments in the first five chapters of Remnants of Meaning, which criticise many current attempts to provide such conditions. Of course, even if Schiffer is correct that many—or even all—current attempts to provide such conditions fail, it scarcely follows that it is impossible to do so.

The quotation is from Quine 1975 p.91.

See: Ryle 1963 p.120. For more recent discussion of a view like Ryle’s, see Boghossian 1990, and Devitt 1991.

The label ‘non-factualism’ is due to this context to Boghossian, 1990. Likewise the label ‘error theory’.

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References


