SCHEFFLER'S SYMBOLS*

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Abstract: 'Scheffler's Symbols' provides an overview of Israel Scheffler's wide-ranging contributions to philosophy, showing how they are engendered by and figure in a powerful nominalistic theory of symbols.

Philosophy's predelection for absolutes is not quixotic. It is born of the conviction that pressing philosophical problems cannot be solved without them. Thus, it is urged, we need certainty to underwrite objective knowledge, transcendent values to secure normative ethics, propositions to make sense of opaque contexts. Some philosophers, thinking such needs cannot be met, settle for subjectivism. Others posit the requisite resources and build their theories on them. This is a risky business, though. For the recent history of philosophy strongly suggests that the criteria such absolutes would have to satisfy are either unclear or unsatisfiable.

Israel Scheffler takes a bolder course. Believing we neither have nor need philosophical absolutes, he shows how to do without them. He disentangles issues that have become intertwined, freeing us from constricted conceptions that hamper our search for solutions. And when he's spelled it all out, it seems so natural and reasonable that we're apt to overlook the powerful philosophical intelligence required to achieve his results.

Scheffler's inscriptionalism discloses unsuspected virtues in austerity. Ontological economies are valuable in themselves. Scheffler delivers more. He develops a form of nominalism capable of solving problems that popular platonist positions cannot.

A context is transparent if and only if coextensive terms are intersubstitutable *salva veritate*; otherwise it is opaque. This familiar way of putting the matter suggests that opacity is a single condition. If so, modal contexts, indirect discourse, teleological arguments, and ascriptions of propositional attitude admit of uniform treatment. The issue is what that treatment is to be.

One approach[1] is to take the content of an opaque construction to express a proposition. Then

(A) It is possible that wallabies have wings

asserts the contingency of the proposition expressed by the sentence

Wallabies have wings

and

(B) Waldo said that wallabies have wings

asserts a relation between Waldo and that proposition. On such an account, all and only sentences that are analytically equivalent to

Wallabies have wings

can be substituted for the contents of (A) and (B). For all and only analytic equivalents express the same proposition.

But propositions inflate ontology. And their identity conditions are obscure. Analyticity, moreover, has proven resistant to explication. On these grounds alone, we should prefer a less tendentious theory.

Extensionalist scruples, however, may be the least of our problems. For even if analytic equivalence is an acceptable standard for substitution into modal contexts, it does not square with our treatment of indirect discourse and ascriptions of propositional attitude. Even if, for example, the word 'alate' is synonymous with the word 'winged', we would not normally replace

Waldo believes (or says) that wallabies have wings

with

Waldo believes (or says) that wallabies are alate

unless we took Waldo to be aware of the synonymy. And we sometimes accept substitutions that cannot plausibly be construed as synonymous. We might, for example, coalesce a complicated characterization of the genetic makeup of wallabies into

It says that wallabies are related to kangaroos.

Propositional attitude ascriptions and indirect discourse, moreover, make demands that propositions evidently cannot satisfy. Our propensity for contradiction causes trouble. If propositions are sets of possible

worlds, a contradiction expresses no proposition. Still, poor Waldo might be confused enough to say or believe or hope that wallabies are noncarniverous carnivores. If, on the other hand, propositions are what is common to sentences that say the same thing (whatever that might be), all contradictions express the same proposition. But the report:

Waldo said that neutrinos both have and lack mass

hardly seems to capture what he was getting at in saying

'Wallabies are noncarniverous carnivores'.

Scheffler evades these difficulties. He construes that-clauses as unbreakable one-place predicates applicable to concrete utterances and inscriptions.[2] (For expository convenience he treats utterances as audible inscriptions. I shall do the same.) The report:

Waldo says that wallabies have wings

becomes

Waldo inscribes a that-wallabies-have-wings inscription

where the locution 'that-wallabies-have-wings' is a predicate applicable to all and only inscriptions that paraphrase

Wallabies have wings.

His account is ontologically parsimonious, being committed to nothing beyond agents and inscriptions. In invoking a flexible standard of paraphrase rather than a rigid requirement of analyticity, it accommodates the contextual variability of permissible rephrasals.[3] It readily handles contradiction. Although true of nothing and expressing nothing, a contradictory remark is as concrete an inscription as any other. So, like any other, it is available for subsumption under that-clause predicates. Waldo's unfortunate remark,

'Wallabies are noncarniverous carnivores',

can then be reported in indirect discourse as

Waldo says that wallabies are meat eaters who eat no meat,

because this amounts to

Waldo inscribes a that-wallabies-are-meat-eaters-who-eat-no-meat inscription

and

'Wallabies are noncarniverous carnivores'

is such an inscription. His remark cannot be reported as

Waldo says that neutrinos both have and lack mass

because

'Wallabies are noncarniverous carnivores'

is not a that-neutrinos-both-have-and-lack-mass inscription. Our tolerance for loose paraphrase does not extend that far.

Inscriptionalism readily accommodates indirect discourse, since speakers' utterances and inscriptions are available to be rephrased. Ascriptions of propositional attitude seem more problematic. For beliefs and aspirations need have no verbal manifestations. Waldo might easily believe, hope, fear, or prefer that wallabies have wings without ever saying so.

Nonetheless, Scheffler contends, an ascription of propositional attitude may be construed as a relation between agent and inscription.[4] But the inscription in question need not be one the agent inscribes. The statement

Waldo believes that wallabies have wings

is to be explicated as

Waldo believes-true a that-wallabies-have-wings inscription.

The existence of a suitable inscription is assured, for my ascription itself contains one. The inscription Waldo believes-true need not be known to, acceptable to, or even intelligible to Waldo. 'Believes-true a that-wallabies-have-wings inscription' is a predicate characterizing agents. And we often correctly characterize agents in ways they cannot acknowledge. So Scheffler's account allows for the ascription of propositional attitudes to infants and non-human animals. Whatever evidence supports the ascription of a belief or desire supports the ascription of believing-true or desiring-true a suitable inscription. Our grounds for

saying that the cat desires that he catch a mouse are equally grounds for saying that he desires-true a that-he-catch-a-mouse inscription.

Contradictory and other self-defeating attitudes are easily accommodated. Thus

Waldo believes-true a that-wallabies-are-noncarnivorous-carnivores inscription

or

Waldo desires-true a that-the-circle-be-squared inscription.

Still, some of our deepest convictions are never brought to light. That extant inscriptions capture these is not at all obvious. Were Scheffler purporting to provide an analysis of *mental states*, this would be a serious objection. But what he offers is an explication of *ascriptions* of mental states. And beliefs and desires that are never brought to light are never ascribed. So the secrets of the heart do not tell against his program.

Indeed one of the virtues of Scheffler's account is that it can provide a semantics for belief-ascriptions without taking a stand on perplexing problems in the philosophy of mind. Since his explications are ontologically committed only to agents and inscriptions, they take no stand and need take no stand on what beliefs, desires, and preferences are. Semantics, Scheffler realizes, need not plumb the depths of heart or mind to perform its modest function.

Nor, contra Davidson, is language as Scheffler construes it unlearnable.[5] Even though the contents of opaque constructions are construed as logically independent one-place predicates, these predicates need not be separately learned. Their creation is a routine matter of embedding sentential inscriptions in that-clauses. Even a child can do it.

Appearances, Scheffler realizes, can be deceiving. What looks like a sentence does not always function as such. In propositional attitude ascriptions, indirect discourse, and explanation, he suggests, what look like sentences function as general terms instead. The power of this approach has been amply demonstrated. Whether such a strategy works for other opaque contexts remains to be worked out.

Even if we can make sense of opaque constructions without them, philosophy may still have need of abstract entities. At least since Plato, philosophers have argued that ethics cannot be objective unless

transcendent ethical values exist.

Efforts to naturalize ethics typically founder on the realization that what is desirable is not always desired, and what is desired not always desirable. The gap between 'is' and 'ought' seems unbridgeable. Some progress is made when we note that 'desirable', like 'visible' is a disposition term. What is visible is not always seen, but is seen under normal circumstances. Perhaps then we can construe the desirable as what is desired under normal circumstances.

This is not enough. It doesn't account for the normativity of ethics -- for the fact that what is desirable is what ought to be desired. Nor is there reason to think that what we desire under normal circumstances coincides with what is in fact desirable. We might normally harbor perverse desires. Is the situation then hopeless?

Scheffler thinks not. Even though it won't do to characterize the desirable as what we desire under normal conditions, we can, he suggests, characterize it as what we *desire to desire* under normal conditions. A naturalistic ethics then would construe 'ought' in terms of the desirable, and the desirable in terms of second-order desires.[6]

Scheffler does not argue for the tenability of such an ethics. His explication simply demonstrates its intelligibility. It is worth noting, though, that the position that emerges is very close to one that David Lewis has recently advocated.[7]

To demonstrate the tenability of such a position would require showing that it accords closely enough with our antecedent ethical convictions. We test our theories, Scheffler believes, not against some fixed stock of irrevocable intuitions, but against our initially credible judgments about the subject at hand.[8]

We do the same in science. Certainty is not to be had. For even observation statements may be given up if they clash with commitments we are loath to reject. Pure coherence, however, is plainly insufficient. A coherent system of mutually supportive statements could be a complete fiction. Objective knowledge, Plato maintained, requires a tether. What Scheffler and Goodman realize is that the tether need not connect theories directly to the world. It is enough if it connects them to our antecedent commitments about the subject.

Those commitments, they contend, have some measure of initial credibility. They are not certain or irrevocable. But they have some presumption in their favor, being our current best guesses as to how things stand. As far as possible, we construct our theories around them, augmenting and correcting as necessary to maximize credibility. A maximally credible theory is, in Rawls's term, in reflective equilibrium. Its elements are reasonable in light of one another, for the theory is coherent. And the theory as a whole is reasonable in light of what we already had reason to believe, for it is tethered to our initially credible judgments. There is, of course, no guarantee that such a theory is true. But by now the history of philosophy should have convinced us that there are no guarantees. And since the theory is maximally credible, we have reason to endorse it in current epistemic circumstances.

In his defense of Goodman's solution to the grue-paradox, Scheffler suggests that differences in entrenchment settle the matter by showing that the preference for 'green' over 'grue' 'exemplif[ies] more comprehensive accepted principles and [is] thus not idiosyncratic'.[9] In fact, he has the resources for a stronger defense. 'Green''s entrenchment endows its use with a measure of initial credibility that 'grue' cannot match. So, other things being equal, in current epistemic circumstances, theories deploying 'green' are more credible than their 'gruesome' rivals. If our goal is to maximize credibility, we should therefore favor 'green' over 'grue'.

One nice feature of this defense is that the presumption in favor of 'green' will be lost should counter-examples emerge. For in that case, hypotheses framed in terms of 'green' lose their initial credibility.

Objectivity, Scheffler contends, depends on methods, not results. A discipline is objective to the extent that it subjects claims to critical scrutiny, to the extent that it allows for testing by independent and impartial criteria.[10]

Scheffler acknowledges that category schemes are human constructs, framed in light of beliefs, interests, and aspirations. And he acknowledges that observation is theory-laden, being informed by habits, expectations, and conceptual commitments. Still, he maintains, science is objective. For whether our standards are satisfied is not settled in our framing of them. Although we set the standards for what counts as a

positron, and what counts as evidence of positrons, whether those standards are met is independent of our beliefs about them. Our forebears likewise set standards for phlogiston, but contrary to confident expectations, nothing answered to them.

Objectivity is not antithetical to enthusiasm, having nothing to do with how or why or with what degree of fervor a hypothesis is formulated. Even if all manner of personal and social forces conspire in its generation, a hypothesis is objective if subject to assessment by impartial criteria. So a scientist's passion for her pet theory is entirely compatible with that theory's objectivity.

Scheffler's discussion disentangles objectivity and truth. An objective judgment may well be false. Objectivity turns on testability. And not all testable judgments pass the tests they face. Moreover, by passing the relevant tests, a judgment is merely confirmed, not proved. And ever since Hume, we've known that a highly confirmed judgment may yet be false. What objectivity insures is that a highly confirmed judgment is reasonable in the epistemic circumstances. Such a judgment, although neither certain nor safe from future repudiation, is for the nonce, good in the way of belief.

Objectivity, plainly, is not peculiar to science. Nor is science the only area where we maximize credibility. We ought not then cavalierly assume that characteristics of scientific knowledge are characteristics of cognition as such. Thus Scheffler investigates metaphor, vagueness, and ambiguity, not with an eye to excluding them from some ideal language of science, but in hope of understanding when and how they contribute to cognition, when and how they mislead.[11] Even though science purports to eschew such devices, they are often powerful sources of illumination in the arts and elsewhere.

Scheffler identifies two devices of cross-reference of particular value in understanding religion: mention selection and re-enactment. Mention selection is a mode of cross reference whereby a symbol refers, not to its denotation, but to mentions thereof.[12] I pull out a photograph and say, 'This is my son, Sam'. It's not Sam, of course, but a picture of him. In saying of the picture,

This is Sam,

I use 'is' mention selectively, so that one symbol that denotes him -- his name -- refers to another that does the

same -- his picture.

Mention selection, Scheffler urges, is a powerful learning device. The young child learns to pick out the elephant and the unicorn in his picture book, thereby acquiring mastery of the concepts 'elephant' and 'unicorn'. The literary critic likewise learns to recognize the web of intertextual cross-references that point to one another through pertaining to the Holy Grail. She thereby acquires a conception of the Grail.

Mention selection also enables us to make sense of otherwise puzzling religious pronouncements.[13] What are we to make of the claim that during the ritual, the priestess is the goddess? If the 'is' is the 'is' of identity, the statement is preposterous. She's no more divine than we are. If, however, the 'is' is one of mention-selection, the statement is reasonable. For then it maintains that the priestess functions as a goddess symbol because she and other goddess-mentions symbolize the same thing. So, for example, by mention-selecting traditional goddess-of-peace-descriptions, the priestess becomes a symbol for peace.[14] Idolatry then consists in mistaking mention selection for denotation -- in taking the name of a god to denote the statue it mention selects.

Quine considers it a constraint on interpretation that for the most part our interlocutors come out sounding rational.[15] By invoking mention selection, Scheffler shows how a range of hitherto recalcitrant religious utterances can be construed so as to satisfy Quine's constraint.

Re-enactment is device whereby the performance of a ritual refers to other performances of the same ritual.[16] A Seder, Scheffler maintains, has multiple referential functions. It denotes the Jews' exodus from Egypt, exemplifies the bitterness of their plight and the joy at their deliverance. It also refers to other Seders throughout history. Each performance reenacts the others. And by referring to them, it embeds itself within tradition and integrates its performers into a community extended in time and space.

Scheffler's discussion shows how religious symbols enhance understanding. They are not just vehicles for reinforcing dogmatic views or nurturing superstition, but mechanisms that locate our activities within a conceptual matrix that provides us with a sense of self and community.

A fruitful blend of respect and disrespect characterizes Israel Scheffler's philosophy. A profound respect

for the phenomena he studies prevents him from dismissing religion as irrational, vagueness and ambiguity as infelicitous, objectivity as spurious. A healthy disrespect for philosophical fashion enables him to formulate alternatives that others have overlooked. He recognizes that foundationalism and coherentism do not exhaust the possibilities for epistemology, that science has no monopoly on knowledge, that emotion is not antithetical to cognition. His rare combination of respect and disrespect is the mark of a real philosopher.

Notes

*This paper was first presented at a joint meeting of the Association for Philosophy of Education and the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking in 1990. The assignment Jonathan Adler gave me was to summarize Israel Scheffler's contributions to philosophy and locate him in the philosophical tradition starting with Plato. (I was allowed half an hour to present my results.)

[1]Cf. Church, Alonzo: 1950, 'On Carnap's Analysis of Statements of Assertion and Belief', *Analysis* 10, pp.97-99.

[2]Scheffler, Israel: [1954]/1986, 'An Inscriptional Approach to Indirect Quotation', in *Inquiries*, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, pp. 7-13.

[3]Scheffler, Israel: [1955]/1986, 'On Synonymy and Indirect Discourse', in *Inquiries*, pp. 14-20.

[4]Scheffler, Israel: 1963, *The Anatomy of Inquiry*, Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, pp. 88-110.

[5]Davidson, Donald: 1965, 'Theories of Meaning and Learnable Languages', in Y. Bar-Hillel, ed., *Logic, Methodology, and the Philosophy of Science*, North Holland Publishing Co., Amsterdam, pp. 383-393; and 1968-9, 'On Saying That', *Synthese*, 19, pp. 130-146.

[6]Scheffler, Israel: [1954]/1986, 'Is the Dewey-like Notion of Desirability Absurd?' in *Inquiries*, pp. 303-308.

[7]Lewis, David: 1989, 'Dispositional Theories of Value', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplement* 63, pp. 113-137.

[8]Scheffler, Israel: [1954]/1986, 'On Justification and Commitment', in *Inquiries*, pp. 293-302. See also, Goodman, Nelson: [1951]/1972, 'Sense and Certainty', in *Problems and Projects*, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, pp. 60-68.

[9]Scheffler, Israel: 1963, p. 319.

[10]Scheffler, Israel: [1967]/1982, *Science and Subjectivity*, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, p.1 and *passim*.

[11]Scheffler, Israel: 1979, *Beyond the Letter*, Routledge, London.

[12]Scheffler, Israel: 1979, p. 35.

[13]Scheffler, Israel: [1981]/1986, 'Symbolic Aspects of Ritual II: Ritual and Reference: Five Modes', in *Inquiries*, pp. 62-64.

[14]I am endebted to Israel Scheffler for helping me clarify this point.

[15]Quine, W. V.: 1960, *Word and Object*, MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 59.

[16]Scheffler, Israel: 1986, 'Symbolic Aspects of Ritual II', pp. 64-67.