

PARAPHRASE AND THE SYMMETRY OBJECTION

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ABSTRACT: There is a puzzle about the use of paraphrase in philosophy, presented most famously in Alston's 'Ontological Commitments' (Alston [1958]), but found throughout the literature. The puzzle arises from the fact that a symmetry required for a paraphrase to be *successful* seems to necessitate a symmetry sufficient for a paraphrase to *fail*, since any two expressions that stand in the *means the same as* relation must also stand in the *has the same (unwanted) commitments as* relation. I show that while this problem does undermine some conceptions of paraphrase, on a proper understanding of paraphrase the puzzle gets no purchase. Since paraphrase is an important component of Quinean approaches to meta-ontology, this paper constitutes a partial defense of Quinean meta-ontology. Since paraphrase is an important component of traditional methods of philosophical inquiry, this paper constitutes a partial defense of traditional modes of philosophizing as well.

KEYWORDS: Paraphrase, Ontological Commitment, Meta-ontology, Quine, Alston

1 Introduction

What is required to tell the whole truth? What needs to be said? What needs to be quantified over? What ideology do we need to use? These questions lie at the heart of the philosophical enterprise. Do we need to use irreducibly moral language to express the facts of morality? Or can the facts of morality be expressed without such language? Must we use modal operators in a complete telling of the truth? Or is it possible to state the modal facts simply by quantifying over a vast plurality of worlds? Can the whole truth be told without referring to abstract objects? Can tensed sentences be adequately paraphrased by tenseless sentences? Are the facts about consciousness describable using sentences containing only physicalistic vocabulary?

It is important to distinguish what we *need* to say in order to tell the whole truth from what we *can* say in order to tell it. All people of good will admit that slavery is wrong. What is in dispute is whether that truth can be captured without using (explicitly) moral language. Likewise, it is a historical fact that Aquinas admired Aristotle. What is up for debate is whether that fact can be expressed in a way that does not entail the existence of past objects. That many people believe that their astrological sign determines their fate is a rather embarrassing matter of public record. The interesting question is whether that truth can be paraphrased without the use of 'believe' or any of its cognates.

Or at least, it was *once* widely thought that questions about how such truths could be formulated were interesting. But the current fashion is to think that we should reformulate

our questions in terms of metaphysical dependence relations such as grounding: asking, for example, how modal truths are *grounded in* non-modal truths rather than how they can be paraphrased in terms of them.¹ This reframing is partially motivated by the conviction that the notion of paraphrase is threatened by paradox. In particular, it is thought that a symmetry required for a paraphrase to be *successful* necessitates a symmetry sufficient for a paraphrase to *fail*, since any two expressions that stand in the *means the same as* relation must also stand in the *has the same (unwanted) commitments as* relation. As Stephen Yablo puts it,

The notion of paraphrase has always been caught between an aspiration to symmetry—paraphrases are supposed to *match* their originals along some semantic dimension—and an aspiration to the opposite—paraphrases are supposed to *improve* on their originals by shedding unwanted ontological commitments.²

Call this the **symmetry problem**. The canonical version of the problem is found in Alston [1958], but it rears its head in numerous other places as well, including Jackson [1980], Melia [1995], Oliver [1996], Yablo [1998], Burgess and Rosen [2005], Varzi [2007], Schaffer [2009], Williams [2012], and Solodkoff [2014]. As Schaffer puts it, ‘If paraphrase is licensed by a symmetric notion like synonymy...there will be at least some opportunities for [paraphrases to undermine themselves].’³ The primary aim of this paper is to show that successful paraphrases can, in fact, stand in the *has the same commitments as* relation, and thus put this worry to rest.

It should be noted that the symmetry problem only afflicts what Burgess and Rosen [2005] call *content-hermeneutic* paraphrases—paraphrases that are supposed to preserve (some aspect of) content. But we sometimes intend our paraphrases to be *revisionary*: we realize that something we (or others) took to be true is false, and we look for something in the neighborhood with which to replace it.⁴ While the finding of such replacement truths is an important part of theory building, the symmetry problem arises only for paraphrases that are attempting to *preserve* but recast the contents of the sentences they are paraphrasing. This class of paraphrases is important: if, for example, it is actually *true* that slavery is wrong, then showing that some other ‘nearby’ truth is expressible in non-moral vocabulary is beside the point.⁵

The role of paraphrase in philosophical inquiry has been recognized most clearly in connection with neo-Quinean theorizing about ontology, where it is used to adjudicate

¹ See Correia and Schnieder [2012] for a nice introduction to the grounding literature.

² Yablo [1998]: fn.47.

³ Schaffer [2009]: 370

⁴ Alternatively, we might realize that a certain understanding of a sentence is inadequate and so aim to replace that way of understanding it with a better one. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing me to say more about the forms that revisionary paraphrase can take.

⁵ In Keller [2015b] I argue that paraphrases must (typically) preserve truth-conditions—an important aspect of meaning—but need not preserve semantic content, in so far as truth-conditionally equivalent sentences can have different semantic contents. See fn.14 for related discussion.

ontological commitments.⁶ Neo-Quinean meta-ontology holds that we are committed to accepting the ontological commitments of our best theories, and it turns out that many of our best non-philosophical theories have, or at least appear to have, controversial ontological implications. Paraphrase is used to arbitrate such commitments. But even though I focus here on the role of paraphrase in ontological inquiry, what I say extends *mutatis mutandis* to concerns about using paraphrase to adjudicate commitments of other kinds.⁷

2 Paraphrase and the Crack Argument

Strict materialists hold that only material things exist.⁸ Such materialists must find a way of reconciling their philosophical doctrine with the obvious facts, such as that there is a crack in my favorite vase. The apparent tension between the existence of a crack in my favorite vase and (strict) materialism is exhibited by the **Crack Argument**.⁹

- (1) There is a crack in my favorite vase.
- ∴ (2) There are cracks.
- (3) Cracks are not material objects in the most straightforward sense: they do not have mass.
- (4) Cracks are not material in some other sense: they are not forces, or fields, or waves.
- ∴ (5) Cracks are not material objects.
- ∴ (6) There are immaterial objects.
- ∴ (7) Materialism is false.

On the face of it, the inferences in this argument appear valid, and the premises look unobjectionable. While some materialists might be tempted to grant the cogency of the Crack Argument and restrict their materialism to the realm of the fundamental, this is a substantial concession: serious materialists should think that admitting that there are immaterial entities of *any* kind is a cost worth avoiding.¹⁰

The traditional response to the Crack Argument, masterfully presented in Lewis and Lewis [1970], is to paraphrase one or more of its premises in order to show that the argument is

⁶ See, e.g., Quine [1948], Lewis and Lewis [1970], Lewis [1986], and van Inwagen [2009]. I call this approach ‘neo-Quinean’ since typical ‘Quinean’ meta-ontologists like David Lewis and Peter van Inwagen embrace an ontology and ideology of meaning (propositions, synonymy, etc.) that Quine himself repudiated. See Manley [2009] for a discussion of why this matters.

⁷ Most importantly, for avoiding unwanted *ideological* commitments: e.g., providing a reductive modal semantics that gives truth-conditions for the modal facts without making use of ‘possible’ or ‘necessary’.

⁸ Other materialists allow for the existence of sets and other *abstracta*, restricting their materialism to the concrete realm.

⁹ Versions of this argument are discussed in many places, including Lewis and Lewis [1970], Casati and Varzi [1995], and Varzi [2007].

¹⁰ Would non-fundamental immaterial souls be acceptable to such materialists?

unsound. For example, one might argue that the inference from (1) to (2) is invalid, since saying ‘there is a crack in my favorite vase’ is just another way of saying

(1*) My favorite vase is cracked.

That there is a crack—that $\exists x(x \text{ is a crack})$ —does not seem to follow from (1*), any more than $\exists x(x \text{ is roundness})$ follows from ‘the vase is round’. Replacing (1) with (1*) yields an argument that does not have the least semblance of validity. Since (1) and (1*) are—or at least appear to be—different ways of saying the same thing, and we have no reason to privilege the apparent logical form of (1) over (1*),¹¹ the truth of (1) is not a compelling reason to accept (2). So it would appear that materialism is not refuted by the regrettable yet obvious fact that my favorite vase is cracked.

Proponents of the symmetry objection argue that this appearance is illusory. But what do they take to be the problem?

3 Paraphrase and The Symmetry Problem

The crux of the symmetry problem is that the symmetry of the *synonymy* relation engenders a symmetry in the *paraphrase* relation that makes paraphrase unable to do its job. Of course, whether this is the case will depend on what we take paraphrase’s ‘job’ to be. As we will see, some prominent discussions of the symmetry problem manifest confusion about the role of paraphrase in philosophy, and an important element of any solution to the puzzle will involve clarifying that role.

The classic formulation of the symmetry problem is given in Alston [1958]. He writes:

Now it is puzzling to me that anyone should claim that [this] translation...“show[s] that we need not assert the existence of [cracks]...in communicating what we want to communicate.” For if the translation of (1) into [(1*)]...is adequate, then they are normally used to make the same assertion. In uttering [(1*)] we would be making the same assertion as we would make if we uttered (1), i.e., the assertion that [there is a crack in the vase]. And so we would be asserting that there is a [crack] (committing ourselves to the existence of a [crack]) just as much by using [(1*)] as by using (1). If, on the other hand, the translation is not adequate, it has not been shown that we can, by uttering [(1*)], communicate what we wanted to

¹¹ At least, *the Crack Argument* provides no reason for privileging (1) over (1*). But what about the fact that (1), but not (1*), is formally entailed by ‘There is a *thin* crack in my favorite vase?’ (Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to address the parallel with Davidson [1967] on adverbial modification.) Well, first, there are strategies for handling inferences like these that don’t involve quantification over cracks (see, e.g., Thomason and Stalnaker [1973]). Second, and more importantly, my ultimate purpose here is not to defuse the Crack Argument or to argue that (1*) is ultimately more perspicuous than (1). It is to show that paraphrases can be ‘non-symmetric’ in philosophically important ways. And if, contrary to what I suggest below, we should privilege the apparent logical form of (1) over that of (1*), that shows that paraphrases can be non-symmetric in philosophically important ways.

communicate when we uttered (1). Hence the point of the translation cannot be put in terms of some assertion or commitment from which it saves us.¹²

The most natural construal of this passage is as a puzzle about removing commitments from *theorists*, but there is a parallel (and in some sense prior) puzzle about removing commitments from *theories*. Some (including Oliver [1996]) have also interpreted Alston as being worried about whether paraphrase can be used to *reveal* the commitments of theorists or theories. To fully solve the symmetry problem, it will be necessary to address all three of these concerns.

3.1 The Puzzle of Commitment Elimination. First, consider the idea that the function of paraphrase is to eliminate commitments from our *theories*. The concern is not hard to see: it is not possible to change the commitments of our theories without changing our theories themselves. As Joseph Melia puts it:

The word ‘paraphrase’ is misleading. Intuitively, *P* is a paraphrase of *Q* if *P* means the same as *Q*. But paraphrases in this sense are useless for our purposes. How can *P* and *Q* have the same meaning whilst only one of them is committed to a certain type of entity?¹³

The picture of paraphrase and commitment presupposed by this strand of the symmetry puzzle has three components: (a) that a successful paraphrase *P* must mean the same thing as the original sentence *Q*; (b) that the commitments or entailments of sentences depend on what they mean; and (c) that the purpose of paraphrase is to eliminate commitments from our theories. It obviously follows from (a) and (b) that any successful paraphrase *P* of *Q* must have the same entailments as *Q*. Just so, if (1*) is a paraphrase of (1), they must entail the same things, making it difficult to see how (1*) can be used to show that the Crack Argument is unsound.

The problem with this picture of paraphrase is with (c): the purpose of paraphrases is to *reveal* commitments, not eliminate them. Why suppose, as those who endorse this concern about paraphrase seem to, that we antecedently know to what (1) is committed? Why be so sure that (1) entails that there are cracks? Why not think that (1) only *apparently* entails the existence of cracks, due to its misleading grammatical form? Melia asks, ‘How can *P* and *Q* have the same meaning whilst only one of them is committed to a certain type of entity?’ The answer to this question is simple: they cannot. But we are not often in the position of knowing just what types of entities philosophically interesting sentences are committed to. What we know are only their *apparent* commitments. But the question ‘How can *P* and *Q* have the same meaning whilst only one of them is *apparently* committed to a certain type of entity?’ answers itself. Appearances do not always match reality. If (1) and (1*) both express

¹² Alston [1958]: 9-10. I have substituted ‘crack’ (etc.) for ‘possibility’ (etc.) for the sake of continuity with our example.

¹³ Melia [1995]: 224, fn.1.

p ,¹⁴ the only reason to think that p entails that there are cracks would be if we thought (1) was a more perspicuous expression of p than (1*) was. But why should we think *that*?

The sentence ‘There is a crack in the vase’ has the grammatical form of an existential claim, which provides a certain amount of evidence that the claim it expresses *is* an existential claim—specifically, a claim of the form ‘ $\exists x \exists! y (x \text{ is a crack} \ \& \ y \text{ is a vase} \ \& \ x \text{ is in } y)$ ’. But it is certainly not *conclusive* evidence—especially since there appear to be sentences expressing that claim with different grammatical forms, such as (1*).¹⁵ If one only considers the original formulation, the idea that the claim it expresses entails that there are cracks seems credible. But once we see that the same claim can be made using (1*), the validity of the inference from (1) to (2) is called into doubt.¹⁶

The point, then, of arguing that (1*) is an adequate paraphrase of (1) is that this undermines the Crack Argument against materialism. Given that (1*) is a successful paraphrase of (1), we should, all else being equal, be *agnostic* about whether the inference from (1) to (2) is valid, since we have no reason to think that the logical form of the claim expressed by (1)/(1*) reflects the grammatical form of (1) rather than (1*). But if we should be agnostic about the validity of that inference, the Crack Argument loses its force.

3.1.1 *The Nature of Commitment.* I have taken the commitments of a theory, and of those that accept that theory, to be the theory’s *logical* entailments—the things that follow, as a matter of logic, from the theory. (I use ‘consequence’, ‘entailment’, and ‘implication’ as stylistic variants, and follow Quine in using ‘theory’ to refer to any sentence or sentences.) On this view, the *ontological* commitments of a theory, and of those that accept it, are the existential or ontological claims that logically follow from it.¹⁷ I believe this to be Quine’s account of commitment—‘the ontology of a theory is a question of what the assertions say or imply that there is’ (Quine [1951]: 14)—but some might prefer to call it a generalization of Quine’s view. In any case, it is a natural conception of commitment.

¹⁴ They *clearly* express the same proposition on a possible worlds conception of propositions (as defended in, e.g., Lewis [1986] and Stalnaker [1999]), where propositions are individuated by their truth-conditions. And, as I argue in Keller [2015b], sameness of truth-conditions is the aspect of meaning that a successful paraphrase must preserve: if (1) and (1*) are true in all the same worlds, and (1*) is true in some worlds where materialism is true (as seems evident), then (1) is consistent with materialism. So even if (1) and (1*) express different ‘fine-grained’ propositions, their truth-conditional equivalence would suffice to undermine the Crack Argument.

¹⁵ (1*) appears to express a claim of the form $\exists! x(x \text{ is a vase} \ \& \ x \text{ is cracked})$ —a claim which does not even *suggest* that $\exists x(x \text{ is a crack})$.

¹⁶ Alternatively, we might realize that although (1) and (1*) express different claims, we were, all along, intending to express the content of (1*) when we asserted (1). If so, there is no ‘cost’ to abandoning (1) in favor of (1*), since it requires no revision in what we believe. (Well, no revision other than our beliefs about the content of (1).) And if we abandon (1) in favor of (1*), the Crack Argument cannot get off the ground. In this case, (1*) would not be a (non-revisionary) paraphrase of (1) itself, but it *would* be a (non-revisionary) paraphrase of the belief we were (trying to) use (1) to express.

¹⁷ For a nice discussion logical consequence in general and the view I favor in particular, see Blanchette [2012].

According to this conception, a *theory* is ontologically committed to *F*s just in case it entails $\exists xFx$, and a *person* is ontologically committed to *F*s just in case she accepts a theory that is.¹⁸ But for the purposes of this paper nothing (important) hangs on accepting this particular conception of commitment. All that matters is that theories can be more or less *perspicuous* about their commitments: that the ontological commitments of a theory are not wholly *transparent*, and that some sentences are more transparent about their commitments than others. This is true on *all* the main theories of ontological commitment, including narrowly quantificational accounts like those traditionally attributed to Quine, modal entailment accounts like those defended in Jackson [1989] and Peacock [2011], *a priori* entailment accounts like those defended in Michael [2008], truthmaker accounts like those defended in Cameron [2008], presupposition accounts, and so on. After all, it is clear that the domain of a theory can be non-transparent: we can be surprised about what a theory quantifies over. (Such was the lesson of Davidson [1967].) More generally, the logical consequences and indeed the logical forms of theories can be non-transparent: theories can have unknown or unexpected logical forms. Similarly, a theory's modal entailments, *a priori* entailments, presuppositions, and truthmakers can be non-transparent: some theories are more perspicuous than others about their modal entailments, what follows from them *a priori*, what they presuppose, and what makes them true. So, while I will continue to focus on differences in *logical* perspicuity, it should be remembered that *any* difference in perspicuity regarding commitments would break the symmetry between paraphrases and the paraphrased, and thus solve the symmetry problem.¹⁹

3.2 The Puzzle of Commitment Avoidance. The second symmetry-related worry about paraphrase is that, as Burgess and Rosen put it, paraphrase works 'too well' (Burgess and Rosen [2005]: 524): if acceptable paraphrases are equivalent to the unacceptable statements they paraphrase, it will turn out that the unacceptable statements must be accepted after all. Hence, paraphrase cannot be used by *theorists* to avoid commitment, even if different formulations of the same *theory* can have different commitments. In our case, if the materialist does not simply deny that anything is cracked—in which case there is no need for her to paraphrase anything in the first place—she seems stuck with the **Anti-Avoidance Argument**:

- (1*) My favorite vase is cracked.
- (P1) There is a crack in my favorite vase iff my favorite vase is cracked.
- ∴ (1) There is a crack in my favorite vase.

¹⁸ Similarly, a theory is ontologically committed to the existence of *a* just in case it entails $\exists x x = a$, and a person is ontologically committed to *a* just in case she accepts a theory that is. The norms for *attributing* commitment are subtle: if I accept a theory that entails $\exists xFx$, and I don't accept any theory that entails $\exists xGx$, and if all *F*s are *G*s, it may appropriate in some contexts to say that I am committed to *G*s.

¹⁹ While the central argument of this paper is compatible with many views about commitment, it is *incompatible* with views according to which the commitments of a theory cannot be hidden or non-obvious. The view defended in Brogaard [2008], according to which the commitments of a theory are the things that it would be irrational for someone who accepted the theory to deny, might seem to be such a view. However, the *idealized* rational commitments of a theory *t*—the things it would be irrational for an *ideal* agent who accepted *t* to deny—will often be non-transparent. And the things that an *actual* agent who accepts *t* would be criticizable for denying are in fact revisable (*via* paraphrase), for the reasons outlined in section 4.

∴ (2) There are cracks.

The Anti-Avoidance Argument appears to be valid, and the premises are difficult to dispute. (1*) is an obvious empirical truth, and (P1) appears to be nothing more than a trivial consequence of the claim that (1) and (1*) paraphrase one another. Furthermore, if (1*) is an adequate paraphrase of (1), it seems that

(2*) Something is cracked

should be an adequate paraphrase of (2). If that is correct, a second Anti-Avoidance Argument can also be formulated as follows:

(1*) My favorite vase is cracked.

∴ (2*) Something is cracked.

(P2) Something is cracked iff there are cracks.

∴ (2) There are cracks.

As Burgess and Rosen put it:

...so long as the paraphrase of a premiss appears to imply the paraphrase of a conclusion, appeal to the paraphrase will only serve to reinforce the appearance that the premiss implies the conclusion...For the [proponent of paraphrase] wishes to claim that [(1)] is assertable because 'deep down it really only means' [(1*)]. Our point is that whatever evidence there may be for claiming that would seem to provide grounds for claiming something else, namely, that [(2)] is assertable because 'deep down it really only means' [(2*)]. And the claim that [(2)] is assertable is an anti-[materialist], not a [materialist] claim. (Burgess and Rosen [1997]: 235-6)

Burgess and Rosen's point is that the adequacy of a paraphrase licenses inferences in both directions. Anyone who proposes to paraphrase (1) with (1*) must accept (P1), and so is stuck with the first Anti-Avoidance Argument. Furthermore, anyone who paraphrases (1) with (1*) should also paraphrase (2) with (2*), and so accept (P2), thus saddling herself with the second Anti-Avoidance Argument as well.²⁰ But this defeats the purpose of paraphrasing (1) in the first place.

For Burgess and Rosen's argument to work, there must be no way of privileging (1*) and (2*) over (1) and (2). But there is: while the *paraphrase of* relation is symmetrical, the *perspicuous paraphrase of* relation is not. Just so, (1) and (1*) paraphrase one another, but they do not *perspicuously* paraphrase one another: (1*) is a *perspicuous* paraphrase of (1), since (at least according to materialists) it is *less misleading* than (1) about the logical form of the claim they

²⁰ A minimal constraint on successful non-revisionary paraphrase would seem to be material equivalence with the original. Hence, those who paraphrase (1) with (1*) and (2) with (2*) must accept (P1) and (P2). One could avoid this result if one held that while, e.g., (1) and (1*) have the same content, they (can) have different truth values because they belong to different 'linguistic levels'. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this.) It is, however, difficult to see how two sentences with the same content could have different truth values, so I prefer the solution offered in the main text.

both express. We can define a perspicuous paraphrase as a paraphrase that wears its logical form on its sleeve²¹—a sentence that can be correctly regimented simply by applying the kind of heuristic rules found in any decent logic textbook. If paraphrases were not required to be at least as perspicuous as the originals, ‘successful’ paraphrases would be trivial to come by.²²

If we grant, then, that (1*) is a perspicuous paraphrase of (1), then while it is true that these sentences entail (2*), they do not entail anything of the form $\exists x$ (x is a crack). And so the paraphrist has a response to the first Anti-Avoidance Argument. But according to the *second* Anti-Avoidance Argument, the paraphrist who paraphrases (1) with (1*) should be willing to paraphrase (2) with (2*), and so accepting (2*) will force her to accept (2) after all. Hence, if the point of paraphrasing (1) is to avoid commitment to (2), the paraphrist will have gotten nowhere.

The point of paraphrasing (1), however, was to avoid commitment to *cracks*—to an ontology of entities that would make true claims of the form ‘ $\exists x$ (x is a crack)’, and therefore ‘ $\exists x$ (x is immaterial)’. While it would be natural to think that (2) expresses a claim of the form ‘ $\exists x$ (x is a crack)’, our paraphrase strategy shows that this natural regimentation is not the only one: we can also regiment (2) as ‘ $\exists x$ (x is cracked)’. And nothing inconsistent with materialism follows from that.

The paraphrist, then, holds that (1*) is more perspicuous than (1). If this is granted, then the Crack Argument is unsound no matter how we regiment (2). Consider these two (slightly simplified) formalizations of the argument:

²¹ More generally, a perspicuous paraphrase wears its commitments on its sleeve.

²² At least if we take ‘successful paraphrases’ to be those that express the target claim without any objectionable formal consequences. As John Searle has argued, sentences making grammatically primitive predications of reality appear to be formally consistent with each other and most anything else. (See Searle [1993] and section 5.3 of Searle [1970].) So, for example, ‘Reality is such-that-my-favorite-vase-is-cracked’ is formally consistent with materialism, and seems to express the fact expressed by (1). The problem is that its formal consistency with materialism comes at a high cost: ‘Reality is such-that-my-favorite-vase-is-cracked’ is, formally, a logical island: its form gives us no clue about the logical properties of the claim it expresses. Indeed, if one blindly applied the standard heuristic rules for translating English sentences into the regimented idiom of logic, ‘Reality is such-that-my-favorite-vase-is-cracked’ would be translated as a *sentence letter* (or perhaps Cr , where r = reality), and one would have to conclude that ‘Reality is such-that-my-favorite-vase-is-cracked’ is *consistent with* ‘There are no cracks in my favorite vase’, ‘Nothing I own is cracked’, etc. Since other ways of expressing (1) do not have this unwelcome lack of logical perspicuity, ‘Reality is such-that-my-favorite-vase-is-cracked’ is an inadequate paraphrase of (1), and cannot be used to reconcile materialism with the fact that my favorite vase is cracked. For a more detailed critique of such paraphrases, see Turner [2010]. Related discussions can be found in Lewis [1983] and Chapter 9.2 of Sider [2012]. Note that according to the argument discussed in fn.11, (1) is a perspicuous paraphrase of (1*), rather than *vice versa*. If that’s true, perspicuity still functions as a symmetry breaker.

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|--------------|---|--------------|---|
| | (1) $\exists! x(x \text{ is a vase \& } x \text{ is cracked})$ | | (1) $\exists! x(x \text{ is a vase \& } x \text{ is cracked})$ |
| \therefore | (2) $\exists x(x \text{ is a crack})$ | \therefore | (2) $\exists x(x \text{ is cracked})$ |
| | (3) $\forall x(x \text{ is a crack} \rightarrow x \text{ is immaterial})$ | | (3) $\forall x(x \text{ is a crack} \rightarrow x \text{ is immaterial})$ |
| \therefore | (4) $\exists x(x \text{ is immaterial})$ | \therefore | (4) $\exists x(x \text{ is immaterial})$ |

In the first version of the argument, (2) is regimented as expressing an ontologically ‘heavyweight’ claim about the existence of cracks. But then the inference from (1) to (2) is manifestly invalid. In the second version of the argument, (2) is regimented more innocently, as being a misleading way of saying that something is cracked. But then the inference to (4) is manifestly invalid. Either way, the materialist is off the hook.

A defender of the Crack Argument might respond by claiming that ‘there are immaterial objects’ has a ‘lightweight’ reading that is *consistent with* ‘ $\neg\exists x(x \text{ is immaterial})$ ’—a reading that would render the Crack Argument sound even if (1) is paraphrased as (1*). Burgess and Rosen, for example, seem to think that ‘real’ nominalists must deny that ‘there exist numbers’ has a lightweight reading that is true, or even assertable: ‘...to concede [‘there exist numbers’, because all it ‘really’ means is ‘There *could have been* numerals’] is to concede all the anti-nominalist maintains [Alston 1958].’ (Burgess and Rosen [2005]: 524. Notice the Alston reference!) But this just isn’t so: anti-nominalists think that $\exists x(x \text{ is a number})$, and that manifestly does not follow from ‘There could have been numerals’. Why would a nominalist care whether ‘there exist numbers’ has a reading that is assertable or true, as long as that reading was compatible with $\neg\exists x(x \text{ is a number})$? Why indeed? Likewise, why would even the strictest materialist care whether ‘there are immaterial objects’ has a reading that is assertable or true, as long as that reading was compatible with $\neg\exists x(x \text{ is immaterial})$? I don’t pretend to know what that reading would *be*, but I cannot for the life of me understand why materialists should care either way. Materialism is a thesis about what *exists*, not a thesis about which ordinary language sentences are true. If it turns out that there is a reading of ‘there are immaterial objects’ that is true but consistent with $\neg\exists x(x \text{ is immaterial})$, that may be surprising, but it is no threat to materialism.

Of course, all of this presupposes that (1) should be given an ontologically lightweight regimentation—that the superficial form of (1*) reflects the logical form of the claim that it and (1) express. But how are we to determine whether this is the case? What if cracks are among the furniture of the world after all? Wouldn’t that suggest that (1) is more perspicuous than (1*)? Here we confront the final symmetry related complaint—that paraphrase has left us dead in the water, without any way of determining our commitments.²³

²³ Another response to Burgess and Rosen’s argument would be to reject (P1) and (P2), retreating to a *revisionary* conception of paraphrase. On this view, (1) and (2) do not in fact have the same truth values as (1*) and (2*): strictly speaking, (1) and (2) are *falsehoods* to be replaced with (1*) and (2*). We are sometimes reluctant to give such revisionary paraphrases, since it is not clear that we have more evidence for philosophical theories like materialism than we do for pre-theoretic facts such as that my favorite vase is cracked. But in this case the revision appears to be costless: (1*) and (2*) are, nearly enough, *stylistic variants* of (1) and (2). If there is a difference between the claims they express, it is a difference that falls below the threshold of cognitive significance. Hence, if (1) and (2) have undesirable implications, they can be replaced with (1*) and (2*) without altering our conception of reality in any noticeable way. In other words, such ‘revisionary’ paraphrases would entail no change in what we *think*, but only what we *say*. On this view, our paraphrases would be *semantically*

3.3 The Puzzle of Commitment Revelation. The final symmetry-related worry is that paraphrase cannot function to reveal the logical properties of the claims in which we are interested, since if we find two formulations of a claim that differ with regard to their apparent commitments, there is no sign—no special ‘glow’—that will tell us which of the two is misleading.²⁴ As Alex Oliver says,

Why should we think that [(1)] deceives, rather than [(1*)]? Why not say that [(1*)] is apparently not committed to [cracks], but its equivalent [(1)] is really committed to [cracks], hence [(1*)] is really committed to [cracks]? I do not know how to answer this question and without an answer the whole project looks to be septic. (Oliver [1996]: 66)

Achille Varzi puts the point as follows:

The trap, here, is to think that we can resolve these issues by mere linguistic analysis. Paraphrasability may well be a necessary condition if we want to *avoid commitment* to entities of some sort, and assertibility a sufficient condition if we want to *proclaim commitment*, but neither is necessary or sufficient to provide us with a clue to what there is. ... To put it in a slogan, linguistic analysis can be a tool for ontological investigations; but it is not a key. For the very issue of *which* sentences must be paraphrased—let alone how they ought to be paraphrased—can only be addressed against the background of one’s own ontological inclinations. (Varzi [2007]: 277)

Now, it is true that, all else being equal, we cannot simply infer from the existence of two different formulations of a claim which if any of them is more perspicuous. And so, if all else is equal, we should be agnostic about which of the two is more perspicuous. But, as noted in section 3.1, this is enough to achieve the goal of paraphrase! In the case at hand, for example, it is enough to defuse the Crack Argument. If we should be agnostic about whether (1) is more perspicuous than (1*), we should be agnostic about whether the inference from (1) to (2) is valid.²⁵ And so materialists cannot be criticized for failing to accept (2)-(7), despite their very sensible acceptance of (1).

It is worth noting, however, that in many cases we do not need to be agnostic about the relative perspicuity of two ways of putting things, because all else is often *not* equal with regard to the different ways of understanding their logical forms. In our example, given the puzzling properties that cracks would have—being located in empty space, for example—we have good reason to think that there are none. And hence we have good reason for thinking

revisionary while remaining cognitively equivalent. Since our pre-theoretic evidence doesn’t support (1) over (1*), it is hard to see what if any costs we would incur by replacing (1) with (1*). Likewise with (2) and (2*). C.f. fn.16. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to address this point.

²⁴ Of course, there will be a ‘special glow’ around the paraphrase that *seems* perspicuous (to you). But *seeming perspicuous* and *being perspicuous* are, sadly, not co-extensive. Recall again that we are focusing on *non-revisionary* paraphrases.

²⁵ Assuming that (2) is interpreted in a heavyweight way. C.f. section 3.2.

that it is (1) that is misleading as to the logical properties of the claim that both it and (1*) express.²⁶

Finally, we should keep in mind that the primary way in which the technique of paraphrase tells us what to believe about the existence of *F*s occurs in those cases in which we *cannot find* an adequate paraphrase of some true claim that appears to entail the existence of *F*s. It was this kind of situation that led Quine to begrudgingly accept the existence of sets, and has led to a resurgence in platonism more generally. In cases where *every* way to express some truth indicates that the truth entails that there are *F*s, we have a strong argument for the conclusion that there are *F*s.²⁷ If we can find no way of regimenting some established truth such that it does not formally entail $\exists x Fx$, we should think that $\exists x Fx$.

Despite all of this, Varzi is right about several points. First, it is true that linguistic analysis cannot tell us which sentences to analyze linguistically. Second, inquiry, when it proceeds properly, proceeds holistically: in particular, ontological considerations are relevant to the evaluation of our theories. Trivially, if a theory entails that there are entities that are *known* not to exist, the theory cannot be true. And finally, Varzi is right about paraphrase not being the key to answering our ontological questions. But there *are no* ‘keys’ to answering philosophical questions.²⁸ There are only tools, one of which is paraphrase.

The fact that paraphrase is not a key does nothing to undermine its role in philosophy. Admitting that paraphrase is no Archimedean point is not to deny that it gives us leverage. Platonists, for example, have gained significant leverage over nominalists as a result of the latter’s failure to find nominalistically acceptable paraphrases of our best scientific and mathematical theories. One’s ‘ontological inclinations’, as Varzi puts it, do not enjoy a place of unassailable privilege in our system of beliefs. Pre-theoretically, I was not inclined to think that there were objects outside of space-time. But this fact about my inclinations is of remarkably little significance in light of the deliverances of science and mathematics.

The primary reason that this strand of the symmetry objection fails, then, is because it attacks a straw man: paraphrase need not be a universal solvent of philosophical problems in order to be a useful tool for discovering the logical properties of our theories. This is well enough, since if we know anything, we know there are no universal philosophical solvents.

²⁶ At least if we assume that (1) is *true*. Of course, as noted in fn.11, other apparently true sentences about cracks, such as ‘There is a *thin* crack in my favorite vase’, might appear to undermine the efficacy of paraphrases like (1*). But again, this doesn’t undermine my general point: we can use differences in perspicuity to ‘break’ other symmetries. If we have reason to think that (1) is more perspicuous than (1*), we have reason to accept an ontology of immaterial objects. And that’s important news!

²⁷ Strictly, every *minimally perspicuous* way of expressing or regimenting the truth, where a minimally perspicuous expression of a claim is a sentence that has formal entailments corresponding to the claim’s uncontroversial or known entailments. See section 3.2.

²⁸ If this doesn’t seem obvious, see Keller [2015a] for a defense.

4 Objective and Subjective Commitments

I have argued that the revelatory conception of paraphrase is correct, and that the idea that we can change the commitments we inherit from our theories, or even the commitments of our theories themselves, is confused.²⁹ But whence this confusion? The explanation, I think, hinges on a failure to distinguish between two different senses of ‘commitment’. Philosophers often use ‘commitment’ to refer to anything that *follows from* a theory: we say that utilitarians, in virtue of accepting utilitarianism, are committed to there being no morally impermissible act-types; mathematical platonists, in virtue of accepting mathematical platonism, are committed to the possibility of knowledge without causal interaction; physicalists, in virtue of accepting physicalism, are committed to there being a naturalistic account of the mind; etc. But philosophers also tend to assume that one is *rationally criticizable* for not accepting the commitments of one’s theories. These two tendencies are in tension. Call the logical consequences of a theory its ‘objective commitments’. In accepting a theory, I inherit its objective commitments—I am objectively committed to everything to which my theories are committed. But I am not always *rationally criticizable* for failing to accept the objective commitments of my theories. I am not, for example, rationally criticizable for failing to accept currently unproven theorems of Peano arithmetic, despite my acceptance of the Peano axioms.

So the objective commitments we inherit from our theories must be distinguished from what we might call our ‘subjective commitments’—the things an adherent of a theory may be *rationally criticized* for failing to accept (in virtue of accepting that theory). Of course, because of differences in inferential ability, background beliefs, etc., people that accept the same theories may have different subjective commitments—I am not rationally criticizable for failing to accept every consequence of the Peano axioms, but a Laplacian demon would be.

And just as we can have objective commitments to which we are not subjectively committed, we can have subjective commitments to which we are not objectively committed. For example, if it clearly and distinctly seems to me that $t \vdash p$, and I accept t , it would be irrational for me to reject p , even if p does not in fact follow from t .³⁰ In such cases, I am subjectively committed to p despite the fact that my acceptance of t does not objectively commit me to p .³¹

Everyone who accepts a theory t acquires the same objective commitments: the logical consequences of t . The subjective commitments they acquire, however, will depend on their inferential abilities, their other beliefs, their logical seemings, etc.

²⁹ Unless we change our theories, of course.

³⁰ At least if we assume that I have no reason to doubt that this seeming is veridical.

³¹ Of course, if I come to *believe* that $(t \rightarrow p)$ on the basis of it seeming that $t \vdash p$ (assuming there *are* such beliefs—see Edgington [1986]), then p will be an objective commitment of my ‘total theory’—of t and this additional belief together. This doesn’t undermine the distinction between the objective and subjective commitments I have in virtue of accepting t itself, however, and there are reasons to think that it won’t undermine the distinction even as applied to total theories.

Differentiating between objective and subjective commitments is an important part of alleviating the sense of puzzlement many have about paraphrase. There is no trouble in seeing how one's *beliefs* about the logical relations among claims can change, even though those relations themselves hold of metaphysical necessity. Hence, if paraphrase can change what it is reasonable for one to believe about what (1) entails—say, by making it reasonable to deny that (1) entails that $\exists x(x \text{ is a crack})$ —it can change what one is *subjectively* committed to in accepting (1). This is the case, despite the fact that what (1) entails, and hence what anyone who accepts (1) is *objectively* committed to, is a matter of necessity. Subjective commitments are relatively transparent but revisable. Objective commitments are non-revisable but generally non-transparent. Paraphrase helps us to determine which are which. The difference is important, and at least some of the appeal of symmetry objection seems to hinge on an equivocation between the two. Even though paraphrase cannot change our objective commitments, it can be used to change our subjective commitments, by helping us determine what our objective commitments actually are. By *revealing* our objective commitments—the actual commitments of our theories—paraphrase can thereby change what we are rationally required to believe.

5 Conclusion

The appearance of paradox surrounding paraphrase is an illusion. Paraphrase is not a tool for *eliminating* commitments from our theories, nor for *avoiding* the commitments of our theories. Rather, it is a tool for *investigating* the commitments of our theories. This is an important philosophical endeavor, both intrinsically, and because we may thereby change our subjective commitments, by revealing that they are *merely* subjective. Paraphrase can change our *rational* commitments, even while leaving our objective commitments intact.

Paraphrase can do philosophical work, since our sentences are not all equally perspicuous—some sentences are misleading as to the commitments of the claims they express. Since good or acceptable paraphrases must be more perspicuous than the sentences they paraphrase, two sentences can be asymmetrical with regard to what makes a paraphrase successful, even if they are symmetrical with respect to meaning. There is, then, no symmetry problem, just a puzzle about what paraphrase is supposed to do. And that puzzle has been solved.

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