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Arguments Against Quine's Paraphrasing

In this paper I will describe Willard Van Orman Quine's view on paraphrasing to remove ontological commitments from our sentences, specifically when we refer to fictional entities, and then Frank Jackson's response to Quine, which demonstrates two flaws with Quine's idea. Then, I will then describe my own arguments of why I believe paraphrasing does not work to remove ontological commitments, which are as follows. Firstly, I believe that when we talk about fictional things such as Pegasus, we do not actually ontologically commit ourselves to the existence of Pegasus because there is an underlying implication that is connected to Pegasus which implies that it does not actually exist, even if we talk about it. Secondly, even if there was an ontological commitment to Pegasus, a paraphrase could not get rid of that commitment because if a paraphrase is the same as the original sentence, it must have the same ontological commitments, and we would also be able to "un-paraphrase" the sentence, going back to the original ontological commitments.

First of all, what is Quine's idea of paraphrasing? From his paper, *On What There Is,* Quine lays out a process of removing ontological commitments from sentences, so that we would be able to talk about entities such as fictional beings without being committed to believing they really exist. His idea is in response to philosophers mentioned in the paper such as McX and Wyman. They would say something like, "Thus, take Pegasus. If Pegasus were not, McX argues, we should not be talking about anything when we use the word; therefore it would be nonsense to say even that Pegasus is not. Thinking to show thus that the denial of Pegasus cannot

be coherently maintained, he concludes that Pegasus is (Quine pg 22)." What this means is that McX and Wyman believe that we cannot say that Pegasus does not exist, because merely by saying "Pegasus" we are referring to something, so Pegasus must exist. Therefore, Quine wants a way to get rid of "simple or descriptive singular nouns" so we can in fact make claims about things not existing.

Quine wants to get rid of these ontological commitments by using Russell's Theory of Description, which involves analyzing sentences in a way that replaces singular descriptions with quantificational words. This way we can speak of things without referring to any specific entity, and thus do not have any ontological commitment. For example, "The author of *Waverley* was a poet" becomes "Someone wrote *Waverly* and was a poet, and nothing else wrote *Waverly*" (Quine pg 25). This way, there is no objective reference so the new sentence is not ontologically committed to the author of *Waverley*.

Therefore, all Quine needs to do is to turn sentences with singular nouns into sentences with singular descriptions, then he can use Russell's theory to get rid of any ontological commitments. Quine thinks any singular noun can be converted into a singular description trivially, for example Pegasus becomes "the thing that pegasizes" (Quine pg 27). In conclusion, Quine believes that we can use paraphrasing to turn singular nouns into singular descriptions, then using Russel;'s Theory of Description we can completely erase any ontological commitment the original sentence had.

Philosopher Frank Jackson has two responses to Quine demonstrating problems with Quine's paraphrasing. His first argument involves what it means to be ontologically committed to something, and how that is reflexive (meaning that a sentence is ontologically committed to

itself), negating the usefulness of paraphrasing. Jackson says that the only plausible definition of ontological commitment is to say that sentence S is ontologically committed to entities of kind K means "S entails there are K's" (Jackson pg 305-306). This leads to two problems for paraphrasing. Firstly, entailment is reflexive, which means that a sentence entails itself. The original sentence entails itself, therefore regardless of if there is a paraphrase or not, the sentence is still ontologically committed to whatever the original sentence is committed to. As Jackson says, "But entailment is reflexive. 'There is (exists) a good chance that she will come' entails itself, and it is of the form 'There are (exists) Ks'. Therefore, on the suggestion under consideration, 'There is (exists) a good chance that she will come' is ontologically committed to the existence of good chances *quite regardless of whether or not a paraphrase is available* (Jackson pg 306)." Secondly, if sentences S1 and S2 paraphrase each other, then S1 entails something if and only if S2 entails it, so they must have the same ontological commitments. This is because Jackson says that entailment is transitive, which means that S1 entails something if and only if S2 entails it. Therefore, Jackson thinks S1 and S2 must have the same ontological commitments.

Jackson's second problem with paraphrasing involves questioning how we can choose a paraphrase's ontological commitments over the original sentence's. Jackson says that someone doing paraphrasing must believe that there is something correct in the paraphrase which is incorrect in the original sentence, namely the ontological commitments. Because the paraphrase still has some ontological commitments, the paraphraser must be willing to accept them, but how can he say that those are the proper ontological commitments, rather than the original ones?

According to Jackson, there is no real reason to choose the paraphrase over the original, so we are just back to where we started in terms of ontological commitments.

Now, I will describe my two arguments against paraphrasing. Firstly, I believe that when we talk about things such as Pegasus, we do not actually ontologically commit ourselves to the existence of Pegasus because there is an underlying implication that is connected to Pegasus which implies that Pegasus does not actually exist, even if we talk about it. We are really talking about the Pegasus-idea, which Quine mentions on page 22 of *On What There Is*. Quine rejects the idea that we could be referring to the Pegasus-idea, but I think his argument is lacking. His argument shows that this couldn't be possible by comparing it to referring to the Parthenon-idea instead of the Pathenon, which Quine claims is ridiculous. He writes, "The Parthenon is visible; the Parthenon-idea is invisible. We cannot easily imagine two things more unlike, and less liable to confusion, than the Parthenon and the Parthenon-idea (Quine pg 22)." However I think this argument is wrong because the Parthenon and Pegasus are fundamentally different. When we speak of the Parthenon, it is implied that we are talking about a real thing, whereas with a Pegasus it is implied that we are talking about a fictional entity. This distinction is important because while Quine is correct that it is right to think that the Parthenon and the Parthenon-idea are very different, he is incorrect to say that the Pegasus and the Pegasus-idea are. They are not different because Pegasus has the implication of being fictional, so ultimately Pegasus is the Pegasus-idea.

Where does the implication come from, how do we know when something is implied to be real or not? Whether or not what we are talking about is supposed to be real or fictional, and therefore only the idea of itself, comes from introspection and our intuition. Almost everybody

knows that something like Pegasus isn't real, and if somebody does believe it is real, they can still talk about it under my theory, as I will show later in the paper.

There are many possible refutations to my theory; I will lay out several of them along with my responses. First, if somebody did believe Pegasus exists, when speaking of Pegasus would their implication be that Pegasus is real, and thus Pegasus is a part of their ontology despite the fact that it actually doesn't exist? Yes, if they believe Pegasus exists then Pegasus would be a part of their ontology, they are just factually incorrect. A follow up from the person raising this refutation could be: but if they believe Pegasus is real and are thus referring to the real Pegasus when they are talking, aren't they referring to something that doesn't genuinely exist, bringing us back to the beginning of why Quine's paraphrasing is needed in the first place, to be able to refer to things that don't exist. Again, my theory allows for this as the person who thinks Pegasus is real has a factual problem, which can be solved empirically by discovering that there are no Pegasi (if doing such a thing is even possible), rather than a problem with the actual ontological references. However, the question of what is the person who believes in Pegasus referring to still remains. This is a good question, but as I will explain in my second argument against Quine, paraphrasing doesn't actually answer it either.

The second possible refutation of my theory is: when we say "Santa is in the North Pole," since the implication of Santa is that he isn't real, does that mean we are talking about the Santa-idea, and if so, how is the Santa-idea at the North Pole, isn't it in our heads? If we are only talking about an idea instead of a "real" thing, how can it have properties such as location? My response is yes, we are talking about the Santa-idea, but we are not wrong to give that idea properties. The idea of something can have properties that apply to it when we talk about the

thing, because we are not talking about the thing but the idea, which is what has the properties in the first place. Part of the Santa-idea is that he lives at the North Pole. Therefore, since according to the Santa-idea Santa lives at the North Pole, it is not wrong to say that "Santa is in the North Pole."

Finally, another possible refutation is: if someone is referring to the Pegasus-idea, doesn't that make it true when they say "Pegasus exists," which seems unintuitive because of course Pegasus doesn't exist? This refutation is saying that under my theory, "Pegasus exists," when spoken by someone who does not believe in Pegasus, would actually be true while intuitively it should be false. I agree that it should be false, and under my theory it still is. Similar to the Santa argument, according to the Pegasus-idea, Pegasus does not actually exist, so when speaking of Pegasus it would be false to say that it does exist. Therefore, "Pegasus exists" is still false under my theory, as it should be.

In conclusion, I disagree with Quine because we don't have to worry about paraphrasing ontological commitments away when talking about fictional entities because sentences such as "Pegasus doesn't exist" don't actually commit us to believing in Pegasus because Pegasus carries with it the implication that it is not a real thing. Therefore, when we speak of Pegasus, we are not referring to some non-existent entity but to the Pegasus-idea, which we can still talk about because it carries with it certain properties. I believe this is a fairly intuitive idea, after all it relies on intuition to determine whether something has the implication of being real or not.

My second argument against paraphrasing is similar to Jacksons. It is: if the paraphrase is the same as the original sentence, how can one have ontological commitments that the other does not? A paraphrase is only a paraphrase if it has the exact same meaning as the original

sentence. Quine himself says that one condition for a valid paraphrase is that it "agrees in truth value [with the original] (*Ontological Reduction and the World of Numbers,* Quine, pg 204)." A supporter of paraphrasing may say that a paraphrase only needs to be equivalent to the original sentence in terms of empirical consequences, and therefore it can have the same empirical meaning as the sentence while having different ontological commitments. However, the empirical consequences must still rely on some sort of ontological commitment, because any sentence with a noun must have an ontological commitment, which leads to Jackson's second argument demonstrating that there is no reason to choose the paraphrase's commitments over the originals.

Also, why can't paraphrasing work in reverse? For example, if we start with the sentence "the thing that pegasizes, " which according to Quine is not ontologically committed to Pegasus, why can't we "un-paraphrase" it to the sentence "Pegasus exists," which is ontologically committed to Pegasus. This also leads to Jackson's argument that we have no reason to choose one sentence's ontological commitments over the other's.

In conclusion, Quine's idea of paraphrasing states that we can remove ontological commitments from sentences by paraphrasing them away from singular nouns into descriptive statements, which can then be removed of their commitments by Russell's Theory of Description. However, I have argued that this does not work for several reasons. Firstly, Jackson presents two arguments against it: 1) ontological commitment means entailment, and since entailment is reflexive, a paraphrase of a sentence must have the same ontological commitments, and 2) even if the paraphrase did have ontological commitments we have no reason to choose the paraphrase's commitments over the original sentence's. Finally, I presented my own two

arguments against paraphrasing: 1) our sentences referring to fictional entities don't really have the ontological commitments Quine says they do, and 2) since a paraphrase has the same meaning as the original they must have the same ontological commitments.

Works Cited:

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