1. Introduction

Is there any way of telling what sorts of things there are given the sorts of things we say? Hopefully yes. Hopefully, if we say that there is a vase in the lobby, and if what we say is true, then in the lobby there must be an object answering to ‘vase’. And if we truthfully say that the vase is on a table, then there must also be an object answering to ‘table’, and it must be under the vase. This seems reasonable especially if we are talking about entities that fall into the same spatio-temporal framework in which we, too, are located—as with vases and tables. (Talk of numbers, sets, and other abstract entities is admittedly more elusive.) Still, what exactly are the grounds for our ontological inclinations here? In the following I argue that such grounds are much looser than we might hope. Even in relation to the realm of ordinary spatio-temporal entities, the bridge between our words and the world out there—if indeed there is a bridge—is full of traps. Here are the two main traps I intend to focus on:

(i) The “surface grammar” trap: To think that all those (sorts of) things exist that are referred to or quantified over in our true statements. For instance, to think that the truth of a statement such as “There is a crack in the vase” entails the existence of such entities as cracks.

(ii) The “deep structure” trap: To think that only those (sorts of) things exist that are referred to or quantified over at the level of deep structure, i.e., in the logical paraphrases of our true statements. For instance, to think that cracks do not exist insofar as statements such as “There is a crack in the vase” can be paraphrased as “The vase is cracked”.

From Language to Ontology: Beware of the Traps

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I take it that the first trap is rather familiar and easily spotted, though not as easily and agreeably as one might think. The second trap, however, can be the source of serious controversy—or so I shall argue.

2. The “Surface Grammar” Trap

Let us begin with the easy part. Generally speaking, given a true statement, at least a statement that is contingently true, there must be some entities that make it true.¹ Yet our language can be misleading, and there is no reason to suppose that every statement wears its truth-makers on its sleeves. When we say that the winged horse does not exist, do we really mean to speak of a non-existing individual? When we say that John gave Mary a kiss, do we really mean to say that there is something—a kiss—that John gave to Mary? On the face of it, there are no straightforward answers to questions such as these. And it is reasonable to suppose that in order to figure out the relevant truth-makers one must go beyond the “surface grammar” of ordinary statements and look at their “deep structure”:² Only the latter is ontologically transparent (or “intrinsically non-misleading”, as Gilbert Ryle put it³). The surface grammar is deceptive.

A paradigm example of this line of thinking can be traced back to Russell’s analysis of negative existentials involving definite descriptions.⁴ Consider

(1) The winged horse does not exist.

The reason why we should not trust the grammatical form of (1) is that it would seem to take us straight to a paradox. It would seem to assert of something (namely, the winged horse) that it does not exist. To put it differently, to see whether the statement is true we would have to look for the object designated by the term occupying the subject position (‘the winged horse’) and check whether it satisfies the condition expressed by the propositional function that follows (‘… does not exist’). But in this case there is no object we can look for;

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¹ I say “generally speaking” because the principle according to which every truth has a truth-maker (a principle most vigorously defended by Armstrong 2004) gives rise to various complications when it comes e.g. to truths concerning abstract entities. See the papers collected in Beebee and Dodd (2005).

² Here and below I follow a terminology that has become popular with Chomsky (1957), but it will be apparent that the distinction need not be cashed out in Chomskyian terms nor, for that matter, in terms of any descriptive linguistic theory.

³ Ryle (1931-32).

⁴ The locus classicus is Russell (1905a).
indeed, the statement is true precisely insofar as the term occupying the subject position does not designate an object. So we would have a problem. That is, we would have a problem unless we deny that the expression ‘the winged horse’ is a genuine singular term acting as the subject of the proposition expressed by (1). And this is exactly the way out offered by Russell. For Russell the grammatical form of (1) is spurious. The very fact that it makes sense to ask whether the winged horse exists constitutes a sufficient reason to deny that ‘the winged horse’ is a genuine singular term, hence a term that can occur as the subject of a genuine proposition. Rather, ‘the winged horse’ is for Russell an “incomplete symbol” that lacks “any significance on its own account” and disappears as soon as we exhibit the deep structure of the sentences in which it occurs. In the present case, the relevant deep structure is explained as follows:

\[(1') \text{ It is not the case that there exists one and only one winged horse,}\]
i.e., as the negation of the conjunction of the following two statements:

\[
(1a) \text{ There exists at least one winged horse.} \\
(1b) \text{ There exists at most one winged horse.}
\]

And the semantic analysis of these two statements poses no problems. Because the predicate ‘winged horse’ has an empty extension, (1a) is false, hence the conjunction of (1a) and (1b) is false, hence its negation is true. No paradox here. In other words, for Russell (1) is nothing but a convenient abbreviation for (1'). And it is (1'), not (1), that delivers the right truth-conditions.

This analysis, of course, applies to every statement whose grammatical form follows the pattern

\[(2) \text{ The so-and-so is } \phi.\]

Not only that. It also applies to those statements in which the definite description ‘the so-and-so’ is replaced by a designating phrase of a different sort, including ordinary proper names such as ‘Pegasus’ or ‘Socrates’. Precisely insofar as it makes sense to ask whether Pegasus or Socrates exist, the corresponding expressions do not for Russell qualify as genuine proper names. They are, rather, disguised descriptions and should be treated as such. For example, ‘Pegasus’ could be seen as an abbreviation of the description ‘the winged horse’; hence a potentially paradoxical assertion such as

\[(3) \text{ Pegasus does not exist}\]
could be identified with (1) and analyzed accordingly. Of course, in some cases
it may be difficult to identify the description that hides behind an ordinary proper name, but this is a practical complication that in principle does not interfere with the theoretical force of the analysis. Besides, as Quine famously emphasized, there is always a possibility to dispense with all ordinary names by relying on descriptions in which the descriptive predicate is construed directly from the names themselves. ‘Pegasus’ could correspond to the description ‘that thing called: P-e-g-a-s-u-s’ or, more simply, ‘that thing that pegasizes’, so that (3) would eventually boil down to

\[(3') \text{ It is not the case that there exists one and only one thing that pegasizes,} \]

which is perfectly unproblematic. In this way, every apparent name would be eliminated in favor of a predicating phrase and the paradoxical flavor of negative existentials would disappear: though it makes no sense to use a name that names nothing, it is perfectly all right to use a predicate that is true of nothing, i.e., a predicate whose extension is the empty set.

Now, this is just one sort of example. But the point is a general one, as it is apparent that the same sort of consideration can be applied to all cases where the ontological import of a statement is at issue. For example, earlier we asked whether a statement such as

\[(4) \text{ John gave Mary a kiss} \]

should be understood as implying the existence of an entity corresponding to the noun phrase ‘a kiss’. Evidently, the answer is in the affirmative if we interpret (4) as asserting that there is something—namely, a kiss—that John gave to Mary. This interpretation would establish a deep similarity between (4) and a statement such as

\[(5) \text{ John gave Mary a book,} \]

in which the reference to a book seems unquestionable. However, things look different if we interpret (4) as a mere grammatical variant of

\[(4') \text{ John kissed Mary.} \]

This is a simple relational statement about John and Mary and nothing else, so the analogy with (5) is lost or, rather, discarded as pertaining exclusively to the level of surface grammar. The verb phrase ‘gave a kiss’ would be a mere gram-

\[5 \text{ See Quine (1939).} \]
grammatical variant of ‘kissed’ (whereas there is no corresponding variant for the verb phrase ‘gave a book’); and the fact that in English we can use the former in place of the latter—one could argue—is merely a linguistic accident, a superficial peculiarity of the English language that should not mislead our ontological intuitions. Even a statement in which the *prima facie* analogy between kisses and books is explicitly asserted, as in

(6) John gave Mary two things: a book and a kiss,
could be suitably paraphrased so as to break the analogy. It would be enough to rewrite (6) as

(6') John gave Mary a book and kissed her,
or something along these lines. We often speak *as though* there were such things as kisses along with people and books. But we often speak loosely—it might be argued—and what we say should not be taken literally. A good deal of linguistic analysis is needed before one can draw any ontological conclusions from the words we use.

It might be objected that speaking of ‘linguistic analysis’ in this context is itself a misleading move. After all, linguistics is based on the assumption that there is a systematic link between syntax and semantics—between surface grammar and deep structure—and that syntactic data must be taken at face value. By contrast, the sort of paraphrases mentioned above are not based on linguistic considerations but rather on considerations that are themselves philosophically driven. Fair enough. I will indeed come back to this point shortly. For the moment let us just agree to use the phrase ‘linguistic analysis’ liberally, to indicate any sort of analysis aimed at exhibiting the meaning structures associated with propositions expressed in natural language. Then the point is that a good deal of such analysis seems required before we can draw any ontological conclusions from the things we say—before we can “read off” any feature of the world from our ways of speaking about it. Here are a few more examples of this sort of analysis, taken somewhat randomly from the philosophical literature. In each case, a statement that seems to be about ontologically “dubious” entities (a crack, a color, a difference in age, etc.) is analyzed as expressing a proposition that is, in fact, ontologically neutral with respect to those entities:\(^6\)

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(7) There is a crack in the vase.
(7') The vase is cracked.
(8) Redness is a sign of ripeness.
(8') Red fruits are ripe.
(9) There is a difference in age between John and Tom.
(9') Either John is older than Tom or Tom is older than John.
(10) This tomato and that fire engine have the same color.
(10') This tomato and that fire engine agree color-wise.
(11) There are many virtues that Tom lacks.
(11') Tom might conceivably be much more virtuous than he is.
(12) The average star has 2.4 planets.
(12') There are 12 planets and 5 stars, or 24 planets and 10 stars, or . . .

Nor are these the only sort of cases one can find in the literature. All of these are examples that illustrate an eliminativist strategy, as we may say. They implement a pattern of analysis whereby the entities mentioned in the surface grammar of a sentence (corresponding to the top item of each pair) are done away with at the level of deep structure. But there are also cases in which the analysis goes in the opposite direction—for instance, cases in which the analysis discloses a hidden quantifier, thereby introducing ontological commitments that do not appear at the level of surface grammar. It is not difficult to find examples of this introductionist strategy in the literature, and the kiss example mentioned above can be turned into a case in point. We have said that a statement such as

(4) John gave Mary a kiss,

which seems to be about John, Mary, and a kiss, can be interpreted as

(4') John kissed Mary,

which is only about John and Mary. This is the eliminativist strategy. But one could equally well argue in the reverse, viewing (4) itself as the correct way to understand (4'), which would therefore be interpreted as a statement involving implicit reference to a kiss, i.e., an implicit existential quantification over kisses. Indeed, there are philosophers (most notably Donald Davidson and Terence Parsons\(^7\)) who have argued that this is the right way to go, in spite of

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\(^7\) See Davidson (1980) and Parsons (1990).
its greater ontological commitments. One reason is that there are patterns of logical inference that would otherwise be difficult to explain. For instance, if (4) is analyzed as (4'), i.e., as a statement asserting that a certain two-place relation obtains between John and Mary, then it would be hard to explain why (4) is logically implied by

(13) John gave Mary a kiss on the cheek,

i.e., by

(13') John kissed Mary on the cheek,

a statement that involves a different, three-place relation. One would have to appeal to some ad hoc meaning postulate linking the two predicates (‘kissed’ and ‘kissed … on’), or else construe the second predicate as the result of applying the modifier ‘on’ to the first and then explain the inference in terms of the logic of adverbial modification—notoriously a difficult task. By contrast, if we take (4) and (13) at face value, then the entailment is straightforward. The latter statement says that John gave Mary something, namely a kiss, and that the kiss was on the cheek; the former says only that John gave Mary a kiss—a plain case of conjunction elimination within an existential quantifier. This is not a proof that (4) and (13) are in order as they stand. But if we are interested in an account of how it is that certain statements mean what they mean, and if the meaning of a statement is at least in part determined by its logical relations to other statements, then one can hardly ignore the relevance of facts such as these. Indeed, from this perspective it is reasonable to suppose, not only that (4) and (13) are in order as they stand, but that they exhibit the deep structure of (4') and (13'), not vice versa. It is because (4') and (13') make implicit reference to a kiss—one could argue—that one can explain their inferential tie in terms of logical entailment.

3. The “Deep Structure” Trap

At this point, however, it is crucial to take stock. We have seen that linguistic analysis can play a key role in revealing the deep structure of our statements, and that this is necessary when it comes to matters of ontology. Before knowing what a sentence is about, or even whether it is about anything at all, we must understand what the sentence means “deep down”. For only the deep structure of a sentence is ontologically transparent. The surface grammar is a trap.
This is the positive side of the story. But there is a negative side, too. For we have also seen that there is no unique way of revealing the deep structure of a sentence. We can read a sentence such as (4), which mentions kisses, as (4'), which only mentions John and Mary. But we can also read (4') as (4). And this is a problem. For how do we choose? How do we determine the direction of the analysis? Appeal to a general principle of ontological economy would favor the first, eliminativist strategy. But arguments à la Davidson would resolve the dilemma in the opposite direction, favoring of the introductionist strategy. How do we choose?

To borrow a maxim from Hilary Putnam, it appears that under such circumstances “Occam’s Razor doesn’t know what to shave”. 8 Perhaps in this specific case a careful scrutiny of the costs and advantages of the options might deliver an answer. After all, that was Davidson’s point. But the dilemma is a general one and arises in every case. Take again a sentence such as

(7) There is a crack in the vase,

which seems to commit us to the existence of a crack, and its crack-free paraphrase:

(7') The vase is cracked.

Ontological parsimony would suggest that we take the paraphrase to reveal the deep structure of the initial statement. To say that there is a crack in a vase is to say something about the vase, namely, that it has a certain shape or structure. So if (7) is true, it is true because of how the vase is. But one may also reverse the order of the analysis. One may think that it is because there is a crack in it that the vase is cracked, in which case it would be (7) that supplies a truly “ontologically transparent” paraphrase of (7'), not vice versa. And there may be good reasons for holding this view. It may be argued that the eliminativist strategy is not fully implementable, or that its full implementation (if possible) would involve unpalatable consequences. 9 For example, since there are many ways in which a vase can be cracked, the eliminativist would have to rely on the availability of a large number of structural predicates that specify, not only that the vase is cracked, but also how it is cracked. Thus, a sentence such as

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9 The impossibility issue is discussed at length in Casati and Varzi (1994).
(14) There is a thin crack in the vase, would have to be paraphrased by suitably modifying the predicate ‘is cracked’:

(14') The vase is thinly-cracked.

But then the inference from (14) to (7) would be difficult to explain in terms of logical form, just as with the inference from (13) to (4), and a Davidsonian line of argument would apply. (The inference is of course straightforward if we take (14) at face value, as a statement asserting that there is a crack in the vase and that the crack is thin.)

Again, the problem is not peculiar to these examples. If indeed it turned out that cracks cannot be paraphrased away in a systematic way, then we might gather that the eliminativist strategy is wrong-headed after all, and we may conclude that to properly describe the world around us we have to posit an ontology that includes cracks as well as vases. But what if it turned out that the eliminativist strategy can be fully implemented? Shall we then conclude that cracks are indeed a façon de parler? Shall we decide that the crack-free paraphrases reflect the deep structure of the corresponding crack-committing statements? Why so, and on what grounds? Ditto for all other cases, where the dispute concerns the existence of colors, age differences, virtues, and so on. Whenever we have a paraphrase $p'$ of a certain statement $p$, we have the option to think of $p'$ as expressing the deep structure of $p$. But we can also think of $p$ as expressing the deep structure of $p'$. After all, paraphrases must be meaning preserving in both directions. So, if in one direction the analysis reflects an eliminativist strategy, in the other direction it reflects an introductionist strategy. And the choice is up for grabs.

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. Neither is necessary or sufficient to determine the ontology itself. 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. If you don’t like cracks, then you may try to paraphrase them away. But if you like them (so to say), then you feel no need to regard statements such as (7) and the like as misleading. If you don’t like kisses, then you
may try to paraphrase them away. But if you think kisses are genuine denizens of reality, then you feel no need to regard statements such as (4) and the like as ontologically deceptive. Ditto for all other cases.

As a matter of fact, this complex trade-off between linguistic analysis and ontological prejudices is already apparent in the first examples considered above. When Russell claims that

(1) The winged horse does not exist

must be paraphrased as

(1') It is not the case that there exists one and only one winged horse,

it is because he holds that (1) is incompatible with our sense of reality—with that robust “feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies”.

The analysis as such yields no ontological discovery. It is Russell’s own ontological convictions that lead him through the quest for an appropriate deep structure for (1), not vice versa. Likewise, it is Quine’s “taste for desert landscapes” that leads him through the quest for a principled generalization of Russell’s strategy. A philosopher of different convictions, however, may feel no need to take such actions. For Meinong (for example), the surface structure of a sentence such as (1) may well coincide with its deep structure because, for him, the winged horse has the same ontological dignity as any other object. It does not exist; but it is nonetheless to be included in a complete, philosophically respectable inventory of the world. And surely this does not make Meinong an incompetent speaker of the language, pace Quine. It simply means that he has different ontological views.

4. Speaking with the Vulgar

So here is the impasse. On the one hand, there is a long and reputable philosophical tradition that emphasizes the importance of linguistic analysis, the idea that in pursuing ontological questions one should start with language and work one’s way outwards. In particular, there is a long and reputable tradition to the effect that because our ordinary linguistic practices may be misleading, we

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10 Russell (1919: 169).
11 Quine (1948: 3).
12 See Meinong (1904), reviewed by Russell himself (1905b). (Here I am going along with the received doctrine, but see Oliver (1999).)
have to be careful; the truth lies beneath the surface and the task of philosophy is to bring it out. Arguably, this is how most analytic philosophers conceive of their work, and it is fair to say that this applies especially to those philosophers who concern themselves with the fundamental question of ontology: “What is there?”. On the other hand, we have just seen that there is no straight analytic path from language to ontology. What guarantee do we have that by suitably disentangling our linguistic practices we would get closer to the truth? What guarantee do we have that our concepts and the words we use to express them, when properly analyzed, will provide us with a key to understanding the nature of things? The only guarantee stems from a tacit adherence to what John Heil calls the “Picture Theory”, the view that elements of the way we represent the world linguistically—at the level of logical form if not in ordinary discourse—line up with elements of the world itself. And that view cries for a justification; it rests on the dubious presupposition that the lining up is unique when, in fact, the very possibility of genuine ontological disputes suggests the opposite.

Here is how I propose to overcome this impasse. Following John Burgess and Gideon Rosen, let us distinguish two ways in which the link between a sentence $p$ and its “transparent” paraphrase $p'$ can be understood. The first is what they call the hermeneutic understanding. On this understanding, the paraphrase, $p'$, reveals the deep structure of $p$ and therefore its truth conditions, those conditions that are supposed to take us straight to the truth-makers of $p$. This is arguably how Russell and Davidson (and many others) conceive of the linguistic analyses they propose in the examples discussed above. The second way to understand a paraphrase is the revolutionary way. On this conception, the paraphrase, $p'$, does not reveal the meaning of the given sentence $p$ but explains it; its purpose is not to exhibit the deep structure or logical form of $p$ but rather to fix it by dint of resisting alternative interpretations. For the sentence as such can be used by different speakers to mean different things. This is not how Russell and Davidson would put it (nor how linguists would conceive of their work) but it is, for example, what Quine has in mind. In short: the revolutionist is not interested in understanding language per se; she just doesn’t want her language to be misunderstood.

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14 This section draws from §4 of Varzi (2002).
15 Burgess and Rosen (1997).
16 See e.g. the essays collected in Preyer and Peter (2002).
17 See especially Quine (1960: §33).
Now the point I want to stress is that revolutionary paraphrases are perfectly all right, but they do not play any direct role in our ontological investigations. They do not and cannot play any direct role because they presuppose that we already have a cause to fight for—that we already have a view about what there is. We just want to make sure that people don’t draw the wrong inferences from what we say, so we provide (only upon request, perhaps) all the necessary linguistic amendments. On the other hand, the hermeneutic paraphrases could be of great help, because they could be truly revealing; yet it is very unclear where we can look for the relevant evidence. In fact, it is not even clear whether there can be any evidence at all, or whether the hermeneutic approach delivers a picture that is intelligible. For the picture would be this: our daily language—the language that we have learned and made ours since our very first contacts with the surrounding world—that language would consist of sentences whose real meaning often eschews us. It would consist of sentences most of which are only acceptable as loose talk. It would at best qualify as a convenient and somewhat metaphorical vernacular with regard to the regimented language of the philosophers, the latter being the only genuine language and thus the only language that can express our genuine ontological commitments. Is this an acceptable picture?

It might be thought that this is not different from what happens when linguistic regimentation takes place in scientific discourse. To borrow an analogy from Peter van Inwagen,\(^\text{18}\) suppose we hear an educated person say:

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(15)] The sun moved behind the elms.
\end{enumerate}

Arguably, we should not interpret her statement as asserting that the sun has really moved. We should be charitable: she spoke loosely and we must reinterpret her in a way that makes (15) consistent with the heliocentric theory—for example as elliptic for a statement in which the movement of the sun is asserted in relation to an observer-centered frame of reference, or as a statement in which the relative movement of the sun is explained away explicitly:

\begin{enumerate}
\item[(15')] Owing to the change in the relative positions and orientations of the earth and the sun, it came to pass that a straight line drawn between here and the sun would have passed through the elms.
\end{enumerate}

This would be legitimate insofar as we would be entitled to assume that the speaker has indeed subscribed to the Copernican revolution (so to say). The

\(^{18}\) See van Inwagen (1990: ch. 11).
speaker has certain views about astronomy, we know that, and we know that if
the need arises she can express herself more clearly. We know all this so well
that we can take care of it on her behalf, interpreting (15) as (15'). (Contextual
cues may, of course, be crucial in this respect. As with every act of communi-
cation, the content of an utterance depends crucially on the relevant back-
ground of shared knowledge and presuppositions.) However, ontology is not
like physics, and when it comes to ontology we can hardly base our interpreta-
tion of what someone says on the basis of the principle of charity. Ordinary
speakers need not be astronomy experts to know that the sun does not move
and the hermeneuticist may rely on this fact. But most people who assert com-
mon-sense sentences about cracks, or about kisses, or about other “dubious”
entities, are totally unaware of any ontological theories about such entities. So
how should one reinterpret those assertions? “The speaker could not possibly
mean to say that there is a crack in the vase! She was speaking loosely. She
meant to say that the vase is cracked.” Is this interpretation legitimate? The
revolutionist is free to mean what she wants by the words she uses, like
Humpty-Dumpty. But what entitles the hermeneuticist to assume that all speak-
ers mean the same?

Nor is this the whole story. As it turns out, both ways of engaging in lin-
guistic analysis involve a duplication of languages. For neither is willing to
give up natural language altogether. Whether we are revolutionists or herme-
neuticist, we surely want to carry on speaking with the vulgar, hence we are
going to emphasize the pragmatic indispensability of ordinary language against
the philosophical value of the regimented language (ontologically impeccable
but practically unspeakable). However, this duplication of languages only
works fine for the revolutionist. For only the revolutionist is always in a posi-
tion to tell which language is being spoken.

Take the crack-eliminativist once again. When speaking with the vulgar,
she can give expression in English to the fact that a vase is cracked by as-
serting:

(7) There is a crack in the vase.

However, when speaking strictly and literally she would rather assert the nega-
tion of (7), namely:

(16) There are no cracks in the vase.

This may be confusing to some people, but the revolutionist will always know
when is when and she will be happy to explain. She may even want to express her views by uttering the conjunction of (7') and (16) in the same breath:

(17) The vase is cracked, but there are no cracks in the vase

—and we would understand. Not so for the hermeneuticist. If you are a hermeneuticist you do not have the same leeway. To the extent that (7) is to be interpreted as (7'), (16) will have to be interpreted as (16'):

(16') The vase is not cracked.

This is so because (16) is just the negation of (7), so the paraphrase of one must be the negation of the paraphrase of the other. But this is bizarre. After all, the vase is cracked. More generally, there appears to be no way for the hermeneuticist to express her ontological views to the effect that

(18) There are no cracks.

For this would have to be interpreted as

(18') Nothing is cracked,

which contradicts (7'). The only option would be to say that (16) and (18), unlike (7), are to be taken strictly and literally. Unlike (7), (16) and (18) are not to be paraphrased. But this is absurd. For then the fundamental distinction between surface grammar and deep structure becomes utterly arbitrary and there appears to be no principled way of discriminating the loosely true from the strictly false.

5. Conclusion

I started out by saying that linguistic analysis can play a crucial role in protecting us from the ontological traps of surface grammar: We should not think that all those things exist that are referred to or quantified over in our ordinary statements. But we have seen that there is also a converse trap, namely, to think that only those things exist that are referred to or quantified over at the level of deep structure, i.e., in the logical paraphrases of our statements. This is a trap because of the multiplicity of the available paraphrases and, more importantly, because of the reversibility of the link between a sentence and any of its paraphrases. At this point, however, we can add that this trap leads to serious drawbacks only if we think of linguistic analysis in hermeneutic terms—only if
we expect the tools of linguistic analysis to provide us with a key to disclose the true ontology underlying our language, or our system of concepts. From a revolutionary perspective the picture looks different. The revolutionist engages in honest ontological theorizing and uses linguistic analysis only for the purpose of clarifying her views. She does not build her ontology into the mind of all speakers of the language. She does not expect the analysis of our language to tell us what our words *deep down* really mean—what they have meant all along. She only expects it to provide some help when it comes to clarifying what *she* really means when she uses certain words. And that is perfectly all right.

Of course this leaves us with the question of what it means to engage in “honest ontological theorizing”. What strategy is available to the revolutionist? If the “picture theory” of meaning is wrong—if it is wrong to suppose that we can read off the structure of the world from our ways of speaking about it—then *how* can one even begin to figure out an answer to the question “What is there?” Alas, this is the big question of ontology, and it is a difficult question indeed. But giving up hermenuticism is no reason to feel at loss. For surely we do not just encounter the world through the veil of language. Especially when it comes to the world of spatio-temporal entities, we have plenty of other worldly experiences, for we too are located in space and time. We see, touch, taste, smell, and hear the things around us. We bump into them and they bump into us. In a way, the whole of science is devoted to figuring out the ontological makeup of the spatio-temporal world. If the revolutionist has a problem, it is not the lack of sources to draw from but, rather, its overwhelming abundance.

So here is the answer I propose to our opening question. There is, in fact, no way of telling what sorts of things there are given the sorts of things we say. But neither is there a complete gap between our words and the world out there. It’s just that the bridge must be built from below, as it were: ontology comes first, and depending on what we think there is, we must attach a meaning to what we say. Going the other way around is wishful thinking. It is to commit a serious ontological fallacy, no matter how we go about drawing a line between surface grammar and deep structure.\(^{19}\)

\(^{19}\) Many thanks to Laure Vieu for her penetrating comments on an earlier version of this paper and, more generally, for helpful exchanges on the general topic this paper is about.
References