Dissolving Yablo's Hostage Crisis: In Defence of Defiance

Abstract

Yablo cites a 'hostage crisis' where an unproblematic statement φ entails, and is hostage to, a problematic statement ψ. Yablo proposes a technical solution by diminishing φ to φ^*, where φ^* would not entail ψ and would thus not be hostage to it. I argue that Yablo's proposal is unnecessary because the original, undiminished φ is not actually hostage to ψ since there is no entailment from φ to ψ in the first place. This is in line with what Yablo names the 'defiant' position. I defend defiance by arguing that φ and ψ are of different metaphysical weights which I show through an analysis of their use of quantification. I conclude that Yablo's efforts to free the hostage φ from ψ by diminishing it to φ^* ought to be rejected in favour of the defiant response.

Introduction

Yablo presents four options for dealing with the hostage crisis: (1) defiance; (2) skepticism; (3) boosterism; and (4) if-thenism. Yablo fails to seriously consider the defiant position, which I take to be a mistake. I aim to show that it is a good, even preferable, option to the others, and the crisis that Yablo cites provides evidence in favour of such a position. The skeptic and booster accept that φ entails ψ, balancing their confidence in φ and ψ accordingly. The skeptic responds to the crisis by becoming skeptical about φ (since it entails ψ which they are skeptical about), whereas the booster responds by becoming confident in ψ (since it is entailed by φ which they are confident in). Such a balancing act resolves the hostage crisis by preventing the surprising result of inferring a problematic ψ from an unproblematic φ, by taking φ and ψ to be as equally problematic or unproblematic as each other. It thus would not matter if φ is hostage to ψ since our confidence levels in φ and ψ would be equal. Thomasson interprets Yablo's if-thenism as an extension of the skeptical response, as in light of becoming skeptical about φ (due to it entailing ψ which they are skeptical about), the if-thenist takes it that one was actually originally confident in a diminished φ^* (which does not entail ψ). φ^* is then freed from ψ and is thus no longer hostage to it, resolving the supposed hostage crisis.

Yablo goes to great efforts to calculate φ^* as $\varphi \sim \psi$, which is understood as the remainder of φ when ψ is taken away from φ, in order to identify a content φ^* that might be heard as what φ expresses, but which does not entail ψ. Yet, according to the defiantist, such efforts are unnecessary. The defiantist holds that φ is actually more probable than ψ, and thus φ itself would not entail ψ. So if one wants to free the hostage φ and prevent the entailment to ψ, one needn't diminish φ to φ^* via the if-thenist route, as one can simply deny that φ is hostage to ψ via the defiant route. The defiant approach dissolves the hostage crisis by showing that there is no entailment from an unproblematic φ to a problematic ψ, and here I will outline why the entailment does not hold. I will argue that it is due to an imbalance not just in the confidence we have in φ and ψ but in the metaphysical weight of φ and ψ, which I will show through distinguishing quantificational commitment from ontological commitment.

1. Ontological hostage crises

In all of Yablo's examples below we have an unproblematic truth φ apparently entailing an ontological claim ψ, showing the hostage crises to be ontological:

      φ: The number of even primes is 1.
      ψ: Numbers exist.

      φ: I am thinking.
      ψ: There are thinking substances.

      φ: This is a hand.
      ψ: There are material objects.

      φ: There are eight pawns on each side [of a chess game].
      ψ: Pawns exist.

What appears to cause the crises is the assumption that the truth of φ commits one to the existence of the things spoken of in φ, entailing an ontological claim ψ. It is the assumed ontological requirements that need to be met for φ to be true that causes φ to be hostage to ψ. I therefore take the hostage crises to reside in the debate over whether one can talk truthfully about nonexistent things, and thus whether one can quantify without existence. Yablo seems to presuppose an answer to this debate by taking the truth of the quantificational φ to entail the ontological ψ. To demonstrate, rewrite his first example as such:

      φ: Some numbers are prime.
      ψ: Numbers exist.

The crisis here concerns an unproblematic quantified claim φ about some numbers being a certain way, as being hostage to, and entailing, an ontological claim ψ about numbers existing in general. But it is controversial to assume that one can generally deduce existence from true quantificational claims. To infer ψ from φ, one must take quantification to be ontologically committing, which Meinongians and some free logicians, who I call *neutralists*, do not hold. Neutralists hold an ontologically neutral reading of quantification and thus can accept that certain statements are true without requiring that the things they speak of exist. Hence, these hostage crises occur only for those who endorse a certain view of the relationship between truth, quantification and existence, and are completely avoided by neutralists. Furthermore, the inferences from φ to ψ that Yablo discusses are evidence that quantification is best interpreted in a neutralist way, rather than in the ontologically loaded way that Yablo presupposes which leads to the hostage crises. I therefore offer a prescriptive proposal to dissolve the hostage crises in a defiant way as well as a descriptive account of why such crises support my proposal to interpret quantification in an ontologically neutral way. Yablo overlooks the neutralists, which I argue he is not entitled to do, given that they hold respectable positions in on-going debates in the history of philosophy, positions that I briefly summarise below.

2. The neutralists

2.1 Meinongians

Meinongians, at a minimum, believe that there are nonexistent things, and that we can truly speak of such things by referring to those nonexistent things. Therefore, they would hold that φ can be true whilst ψ is false, as it may be true that some numbers are prime even though numbers do not exist, and we can truly say '3 is a prime number' whilst referring to the nonexistent object '3'. Meinongians argue that properties can be truly attributed to nonexistent things, and as such being a prime can be truly attributed to numbers even if they are nonexistent things. The ability to refer to nonexistent things is explained by domains of quantification containing both existent and nonexistent members, and so the quantifiers are treated as ontologically neutral in order to quantify over both. Successfully referring to an object in the domain will not entail the existence of that object, and truthfully describing a thing to be a certain way will not entail the existence of that object. When one speaks of a thing as in φ, they may refer to an existent or a nonexistent thing, and as such φ will not entail ψ which explicitly claims that the thing spoken of is existent. (For examples of Meinongian arguments see Parsons (1982) and Routley (1982).)

2.2 Free logicians

One feature of some systems of free logic is that they allow for successful reference without referents, such that one could make a true statement without referring to anything whatsoever (not even to a nonexistent thing). Therefore, one can talk truthfully without there being a referent to talk about. This is because such free logicians allow for quantification over an empty domain, and so a member of a domain to serve as a referent is not always required. Hence, quantification will be ontologically neutral since to quantify over a domain will not necessitate the existence of members, as there may be no members at all to quantify over. As such, statements like φ can be true whilst a corresponding statement like ψ is false, because φ can talk truthfully about a thing without *any* referent at all, let alone a referent to an existent thing as ψ demands. (See Sainsbury (2005) for a discussion of reference without referents in free logic.)

3. Metaphysical weight

There is an important difference between φ and ψ which will illuminate why I take it that φ does not entail ψ. I take such differences at face value and treat them as evidence against the legitimacy of the hostage crises. The differences that Yablo cites (and then goes on to defuse) between φ and ψ are as such:

> φ is unproblematic and probable, which we are initially confident in.
> ψ is problematic and improbable, which we are initially skeptical towards.

I propose to think in terms of the metaphysical weight of φ and ψ, which will explain the differences above rather than defusing them. By the phrase 'metaphysical weight', I mean how ontologically laden the statement is, for example Hofweber (2007) speaks of 'innocent statements' and their 'metaphysically loaded counterparts', where statements like φ look to be

innocent (or lightweight), and statements like ψ look to be metaphysically loaded (or heavyweight). Given this imbalance in weight between our two propositions, we may question how it is that φ can entail ψ, when φ is a lightweight statement entailing the heavier ψ. This is just a re-description of Yablo's hostage crises, where he writes that the problem arises when "the logically stronger claim [φ] seems likelier than its weaker counterpart [ψ]" (p4).

Rather than accepting this difference, Yablo presents lines of response that try to resolve it, in order to understand how φ can entail ψ by balancing out their probabilities and our levels of confidence in them. So parallel to the booster and skeptical responses, one can balance the weighting issue by arguing that: (i) ψ is not as heavyweight as we initially thought, actually ψ is just as innocent as φ (and as such we should boost our confidence in ψ in seeing it to be just as probable as φ); or (ii) φ is more heavyweight than we initially thought, actually φ is equally as ontologically loaded as ψ (and as such we should become more skeptical about φ in seeing it to be as improbable as ψ). Instead of defusing the differences and balancing φ with ψ, I defiantly argue that we accept the differences and use the imbalance as evidence that φ *does not entail* ψ, which in turn is evidence for neutralism – that quantification does not entail existence.

4. Quantificational and ontological commitments

The reason that φ is lightweight and ψ is heavyweight is because φ is *merely* a quantificational claim and ψ an ontological claim. And I, like neutralists, argue that one cannot deduce ontology from quantifiers. As such φ does not entail ψ because quantificational commitment should not be conflated with ontological commitment. Once one has distinguished between these types of commitment the crisis is dissolved, as φ is no longer hostage to ψ when φ delivers merely lightweight quantificational commitments and ψ instead delivers heavyweight ontological commitments. To see this, let us return to our example:

φ: Some numbers are primes.
ψ: Numbers exist.

It is common for φ to be rewritten as 'There exists some numbers that are prime', which clearly entails the existence of numbers (ψ). But it is unnecessary (and I take it to be incorrect) to interpret the quantificational 'some' as equivalent to the ontological 'there exists'. The difference between 'some' and 'there exists' is that 'some' is an ontologically neutral quantificational term, and 'there exists' is not a quantificational term at all. 'Some' is about the number of things (namely at least one of them), and so is *quantitative*, whereas 'there exists' describes those things as existent, and so is *qualitative*. Therefore the word 'some' is fit for numerical quantificational use, and 'there exists' is not, as existence may be better understood as a predicate. The commitments that one gains from 'some' will be lightweight and quantificational, and alternatively the commitments that one gains from 'exists' will be heavyweight and ontological. (For a more detailed exposition of why these types of commitments should not be conflated, see Berto (2012), Azzouni (2004), and Priest (2008), for example.)

A defiantist accepts this difference to dissolve the crisis, whereas the booster and skeptic aim to balance the weight to make sense of the entailment between φ and ψ. The booster will decrease the weight of ψ in order to boost their confidence in it, making φ and ψ both lightweight and merely quantificational. The skeptic will increase the weight of φ in order to become more skeptical of it, making φ and ψ both heavyweight and ontological. Indeed it is the skeptic who is guilty of rewriting φ as the heavyweight 'There exists some numbers that are primes', and as a result Yablo searches for a diminished lightweight φ* that does not entail ψ. But the search for the identity of φ* starts and ends with φ, as φ is already sufficiently diminished and lightweight to not entail ψ once we hold with the neutralists that φ is quantificational and ψ is ontological.

5. The defiant conclusion

In conclusion, if one, like Yablo, finds the hostage crisis legitimate, then one, like Yablo, is moved to finding a way to free the innocent hostage φ from its metaphysically loaded counterpart ψ. Yet such efforts are in vain when one can just dissolve the crisis, for example, by taking a defiant position in denying that φ was ever hostage to ψ in the first place due to the neutralist reading of quantification in φ and ψ. According to the neutralists, if φ never alone implied ψ, then there is no crisis for which the identification of a diminished φ* is needed. The defiant claim that φ is more probable than ψ is supported by the neutralists, and we must take such positions seriously, as they are independently motivated, and may require fewer interpretive assumptions about how listeners hear the content of φ without the need to contort it as φ*.[1]

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