Still cheating, still prospering

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1. Introduction

Krämer (2010) seeks to object to the claim made in my 'Ontological Cheats Might Just Prosper' (*Cheats*, hereafter), that, in at least some cases, it is theoretically virtuous to avoid grounding particular truths in reality. Krämer argues that the original defence took two strands. The first strand Krämer correctly identifies:

> Rejecting the grounding principle in favour of a weaker alternative allows us to account for the truth of modal and past-tensed claims in a more *ontologically parsimonious* way. (290)

The second strand, however, Krämer misidentifies.

> The ontological parsimony gained by those theories violating the grounding principle is not counterbalanced by the comparative simplicity and elegance of their competitors since the latter kind of simplicity is not a genuine *theoretical virtue*, whereas ontological parsimony is. (290)

Nowhere in the original defence is it claimed that the elegance of a theory is not a theoretical virtue. To the contrary, 'ontological parsimony and theoretical simplicity are both virtues that need to be considered' (Tallant 2009, *Cheats*, 426). As we shall see, this ultimately results in the cheat being able to avoid Krämer's criticisms.

In what follows, I'll restrict myself largely to discussion of the temporal cases and assume presentism (as is the case in *Cheats*). The responses preserve the core of the earlier 'cheating' view, but I'm grateful to Krämer for forcing me to revise the earlier position.

2. Stating what it is to cheat

Krämer states what he takes to be a sensible account of the grounding principle (GP).

> (GP) Necessarily, for every true proposition (except negative existentials), there is something which grounds it, which makes it true. (2010, 291)

As Krämer points out, the revised account offered in *Cheats* fails, if considered as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions.

> NGC–ST: a proposition is true if and only if, either; (a) there exists an entity that makes that proposition true; or, (b) there does not exist an entity and that makes the proposition true; or, (c) there could have

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existed an entity that would make the proposition true; or, (d) there has existed an entity that makes the proposition true.

To borrow Krämer's example, <some donkeys talk> satisfies condition (c) – there could have been some entity that grounds the proposition – and so the proposition is true. That's a bad result.

Now, although I concede that Krämer is correct about the principle, the reasoning that led to NGC-ST still seems sound and is not disputed. In *Cheats* (425), I argued that the demand for ground for propositions about what reality lacks might lead one into ontological seriousness about 'lacks', but consideration of 'lacks' *will not* lead into ontological seriousness. We think, rather, that the term 'a lack' is a way of saying that a particular entity *is not there* (cf. Lewis 1992). The same point applies in the temporal case; we do not think that talk *about* 'the past' is a way of talking about a 'thing' or 'things', but a way of describing how things *have been* (*ibid*). Crudely, in neither case does the subject matter of the proposition appear to be an existent.

So what, then, should we say about truths that lack ground? Here, we need to introduce a Cheats grounding principle to replace NGC-ST: CGP.

CGP: For every proposition, that proposition is true iff it accurately characterizes its subject matter.

To elaborate, the proposition <there is an absence of Hobbits> accurately characterizes the world, not if there are entities such as *hobbit absences*, but if there *are no hobbits*; the proposition <there were dinosaurs> accurately characterizes the world, not if there are *existing things* that make true the proposition, but if dinosaurs *have existed*.

Thus, in place of the long and convoluted principle expressed by NGC-ST, we have the extremely elegant CGP.

We must now accomplish two tasks. First, we must show that CGP is intelligible and preserves the cheater's insight; second, we must show that it satisfies Krämer's problem cases.

The first task is straightforward. The intention behind NGC-ST was to capture the thought that propositions *about* what does not exist, do not need ground; that propositions about *what there was* do not need ground, etc. The thought was, as we have seen, that the subject matter in each case does not appear to be an existent. To repeat: absences don't seem to be 'existents'; the past does not seem to exist – and so on.

Instead, the thought was, we should think of truths of possibility being true if what they describe *is possible*; truths about the past being true if what they describe *was the case*; truths about what there is not being true if they accurately describe *what is not*.

Now, if NGC-ST was trying to capture the thought that where what a proposition is *about* is not an existent, the true proposition does not require

ground (it merely needs to adequately characterize matters) then, rather than adopt the multi-clause behemoth that is NGC-ST, it seems far more appropriate to opt for CGP.

Thus, CGP eloquently captures the sentiment behind NGC-ST. Provided that sentiment is reasonable – and nothing Krämer says suggests otherwise – then CGP appears a sensible slogan for the cheat to endorse.

The second task is also straightforward. The proposition <some donkeys talk> describes the world as including talking donkeys. Thus, to be true, the proposition would require ground. Since it lacks such ground, so the proposition is false. Other propositions that Krämer considers can also be dealt with: <possibly, there are no human beings> does not describe what exists; it describes what *could fail to exist*. Such a proposition does not describe entities as existing, but as possibly not existing. Thus, to be true, we merely require that *it's possible that no humans exist*. This is not obviously a proposition that requires ground; it is instead a true proposition that accurately characterizes matters iff *people could fail to exist*. But, once more, that does not (obviously) describe an *existing state of affairs*; it describes some state of affairs *being merely possible*.

3. *Unexplained truths*

Krämer accuses me of failing to consider propositions such as 'there were exactly *n* emperors of Rome' (2010, 294). On the account given, I would be obliged to explain the truth of this by saying something like 'it was the case that: there are exactly *n* Emperors of Rome'. Since at no time have there existed, for instance, four Emperors of Rome, so my account is deficient.

However, Krämer's concerns are already dealt with in the literature. Brogaard (2007) offers a sustained defence of presentist 'span-operators'. She defends the idea that the presentist might employ an operator of the form: 'it HAS been that'.

As Brogaard (74) notes, the operators 'was' and 'will' do nothing more than pick out how the world is at any single 'snapshot' of time. The span operators, then, will do nothing more than collect these together. Since Krämer doesn't offer any argument against this line (nor am I aware of one in the literature), I shall not devote any more space to this objection.

4. *Appeals to parsimony*

Krämer points out that I appealed to a passage from Melia. Here is the whole of that appeal (*Cheats*, 426–7):

Following Melia, then:

> I prefer the hypothesis that makes *the world* a simpler place. For sure, all else being equal, I prefer the theory with the simpler ontology . . . the

> simplicity I value attaches to the kind of world postulated by the theory—not to the *formulation* of the theory itself (Melia 2000: 473).

Krämer (2010: 295) then goes on to point out that there is a substantial difference between the case that Melia is considering, and the case that I considered.

But, as we can see, nothing in the original appeal makes reference to the *content* of Melia's *case*; rather, the appeal was *merely* to the sentiment: we might prefer *ontological simplicity* to *ideological* simplicity.

5. *Parsimony reconsidered*

In any case, Krämer (2010: 295–96) invites us to consider a further scenario with the intention of demonstrating that cheating carries with it certain costs. In so doing, he hopes to undermine the sentiment that I appealed to just a moment ago. If successful, this would render preference for ontological parsimony unviable, Krämer thinks. So this is the key to Krämer's argument.

Consider a 'grounders' world; a world where all propositions are grounded in reality. Krämer then suggests that we treat F_G as the set of propositions that the grounder accepts as fundamental truths about the world. Then, from those truths, subtract those that require the truth of modal and temporal ontology. Call the result F^*. Krämer thinks that the Cheat's world is more complex than F^*. The Cheat, after all, cannot accept F^* as a complete description of the world. The Cheat thinks that there is more to be said about the nature of the world and that means, obviously, that the Cheat's world is more complex than is F^*.

But, as I noted above, both theoretical complexity *and* ontological parsimony were treated as theoretical virtues in *Cheats*. In a number of places, sadly, the dialectical strategy in *Cheats* is weakened by *simply* comparing and contrasting ontological parsimony and theoretical simplicity. For instance,

> Since the no-ground cheat will *always* have a simpler world than someone who does not cheat, so their view posits a simpler world and is preferable. We exchange ontological complexity for complexity in our account of when propositions are true. (Tallant 2009: 427)

But if we're careful, then we can see that the cheat can make a rather more persuasive argument.

I *first* argued that '... just as the natural intuition is that "lacks" are not to be reified as existents, so our intuition is that "the past" ought not to be reified, either.' (Tallant 2009: 425). Further, that 'consideration of the nature of the both "the past" and "lacks" seems to speak against their being reified' (425). This establishes that there is a common sense, intuitive, advantage to the cheat's position – that there is an intuitive advantage to *not* grounding true propositions about what there is not/about the past etc.

This is the backdrop against which we must weigh considerations of ontological parsimony and theoretical elegance. Since ontological parsimony *is* a virtue (provided explanatory completeness is preserved) we find ourselves in a situation where, the cheat may concede, the grounder *does* have theoretical simplicity on their side. The cheat, however, has common sense and intuition, *as well as* ontological parsimony on theirs. We thus find ourselves with two reasons to cheat and only one reason not to. That, the cheat will argue, is enough to tempt us into a little light theft.

So, *here* is the cheat's reason to prefer ideology to ontology; the cheat's view commits us to an intuitive ideology *and* preserves ontological parsimony; the grounders view *merely* preserves theoretical simplicity. When we engage in the 'weights and balances' considerations that are recommended (*Cheats*, 426), that appears to favour the cheat's view.

6. *Conclusion*

There is work for ideology; there is work for ontology. Getting clear upon which 'ology' is best suited to which sort of work must, of necessity, proceed on a case-by-case basis. Nonetheless, the cheat will claim, it remains the case that there appear to be advantages to theft over honest toil – especially where the task in hand is robbery.

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Frankfurt counter-example defused

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Frankfurt's 1969 paper 'Alternate possibilities and moral responsibility' purports to refute the principle that a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise. It offers a case in which,

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