

APPENDIX C

On Prepositions

The debate between Transcendental Monotheism and Trinitarianism with respect to how to understand particular passages hinges on prepositions in some cases. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind some basic facts about prepositions in general. Note the following facts about prepositions and how they are used:

FACT #1: The same preposition can be used in different ways. Some prepositions can be used in a wide variety of different ways.

Consider the English preposition "by." It is used in a different sense in all of the following:

He traveled by land.
He traveled by boat.
The room was cleaned by Mary
My house was destroyed by the hurricane.
It is on the counter by the refrigerator
Success comes by hard work
By the time I get there, it will be over.

The camera is above the refrigerator.
His performance was above that of the others.

See Appendix F for another example of a preposition with a wide range of different uses—"through".

FACT #2: Exactly the same idea can be expressed in different languages by different prepositions. That is, if I express an idea using a particular preposition in my language, a foreign language may very well not express that same idea using the preposition that typically corresponds to the preposition I use in my language.

So, for example:

In English, I would say, "I am **at** home."

In Spanish, one would say, "*Estoy en casa.*"—that is, "I am **in** home."

In English—to mean I am standing up—I would say, "I am **on** my feet."

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In Spanish—to mean one is standing up—one would say, “*Estoy de pie.*”—that is, “I am *of / from* foot.”

Anyone who has knowledge of another language can think of several examples of this kind of phenomenon.

FACT #3: Virtually the same idea (if not exactly the same idea) can be expressed in English (and presumably any other language) using different prepositions. So, preposition usage can overlap greatly.

Consider the following:

The picture is over the fireplace. = The picture is above the fireplace.

The pot is on the stove. = The pot is on top of the stove. = The pot is upon the stove.

I have arrived at this conclusion on the basis of the evidence. = I have arrived at this conclusion because of the evidence. = I have arrived at this conclusion by the evidence. = I have arrived at this conclusion on the evidence. = I have arrived at this conclusion due to the evidence. = I have arrived at this conclusion in the light of the evidence. = I have arrived at this conclusion in view of the evidence. = I have arrived at this conclusion from the evidence.

FACT #4: The same preposition can be used multiple times with different meanings in the same sentence and/or in immediately conjoining sentences without causing significant confusion about what each usage means.

Consider the following:

“I saw you on TV. You were getting on the bus on the day after the hurricane. I think you were talking on the phone.”

(I could go on with this example, but this is enough on this point.)

FACT #5: In English (and presumably any other language), similar ideas—ideas which are not logically distinguishable from one another—are expressed using different prepositions in different contexts on on different occasions; and, a native speaker would consider it improper to reverse the usage within those contexts or occasions.

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Consider the following:

We speak of getting *in* a boat; but we speak of getting *on* a ship.

It would be misleading or, at least, sound unnatural to us to speak of getting *on* a boat or getting *in* a ship.

We would typically speak of crossing *over* a river; but we would speak of crossing *through* a desert.

It would be misleading or, at least, sound unnatural to us to speak of crossing *through* a river or *over* a dessert.

CONCLUSION FROM THE ABOVE FACTS:

CONCLUSION #1: From Facts #2 and #5 it should be evident that one's use of prepositions is not based logically on what a preposition means; rather, one's use of a preposition is based on what is conventional within the patterns of usage of that language culture.

It is not logically necessary that one describe himself as being "at home" rather than "in home." But the convention is to say "at home" and not "in home."

It is not logically necessary for one to state that an accountant or businessman is going "over" a set of numbers rather than "under" a set of numbers. Certainly, the latter ("under") could be logically justified just as easily as the former ("over"). But the convention is to say "over" and not "under."

There is nothing about the meaning of "over" and "through" respectively that would logically require us to speak of crossing "over" a river rather than "through" a river. Furthermore, nothing in their meaning would require us to speak of crossing "through" a dessert" rather than "over" a dessert. We speak as we due strictly as a matter of convention.

CONCLUSION #2: From the above, it follows that the native speaker does not choose his prepositions based on what logically makes sense, given some meaning that the preposition has. He chooses his prepositions based on what "sounds" right to his ear—an ear that has been trained by his language culture to expect certain patterns of conventional usage.

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There is nothing about the meaning of “in” and “on” respectively that would make it logically impossible to speak of getting “on a boat” and “in a ship.” However, to do so would be to break the conventional pattern. Accordingly, it would sound funny to a native speaker.

CONCLUSION #3: Unlike other words in a language, prepositions are not best thought of as having “fields of meaning.” They don’t have a meaning that dictates how they are used. They have patterns of usage that are determined by the language culture.

Accordingly, the various uses of a preposition by the conventions of a language culture need not be logically connected with one another. How and when to use a particular preposition will not and need not be predictable. It cannot be deduced from some “meaning” of the preposition. To think in those terms is to make the mistake of thinking of a preposition the same way one would think of the other words in the language.

Is there any reason to think that a non-English speaker would be able to predict, without every hearing the phrase, that an English speaker will say...

That sofa is *in* good condition, rather than *at* good condition?

I want you to go to the store *with* me, rather than *by* me?

Since it is not some “meaning” that determines how a native speaker uses his prepositions, the only way to know what preposition to use—in order to speak like a native speaker—is to develop an ear for what sounds right and what does not sound right. Sounding “right” is equivalent to sounding familiar, conforming to the conventional patterns of usage.

Consider a non-native speaker who has learned English well and generally speaks the language well: if he makes any mistakes at all, it will inevitably be a matter of using the “wrong” preposition. Preposition usage is characteristically the most difficult part of any language to master. Why? Because there is only one way to know what preposition to use when—by developing an ear for the patterns of conventional usage. One cannot deduce it from some “meaning” of the preposition.

CONCLUSION #4: From the above it follows that prepositions do not make a separate and distinct contribution to the meaning of a sentence to the same extent that other words in the language do. Accordingly, one will typically be able to know what a statement means without being able to specify or articulate what some preposition that occurs in that statement means.

This explains why, when a non-native speaker uses the “wrong” preposition in a statement, we almost always know exactly what he meant by his statement. His choice

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of the wrong preposition did not substantially alter the meaning of his statement. The meaning of the statement was independent of the preposition used to express it. So, a preposition is rarely even semantically wrong; it is "wrong" by the conventions of English syntax. When a non-native speaker says, "I'll be *to* your house at 6 o'clock," we are not confused by it. He meant, "I'll be *at* your house at 6 o'clock." The preposition "to" was wrong by the conventions of English usage, but there was nothing semantically confused in his use of it. So, the preposition "to" does not so much have a discreet, determinate meaning that it contributes to the statement. It is one of many syntactic flags that could have been used. It is largely convention that dictates which syntactic flag gets used in what statements in which contexts.

CONCLUSION #5: From the above it follows that one will typically be able to know what a statement means without being able to specify or articulate what some preposition that occurs in that statement means. Accordingly, one will be able to know the meaning of statements in which a preposition occurs without having analyzed the semantics underlying the pattern of usage of that preposition.

CONCLUSION #6: Accordingly, it follows that, in a language like New Testament Greek (a dead language), the way to determine what a preposition "means" is to find every place where that preposition is used, to determine the meaning of each sentence in which it is used, and then—having determined the meaning of each sentence in which it occurs—to analyze the semantic relationship that is being indicated by each occurrence of that preposition. Therefore, one should never think in terms of establishing what a preposition "means" and then afterward determining what those statements mean in which it occurs. That would be backwards. One must determine what a preposition means, having already determined what those sentences in which it occurs mean; not the other way round.

CONCLUSION #7: One may very well be unable to know *exactly* what semantic relationship is indicated by the use of a particular preposition. Because one can understand the meaning of a sentence without first understanding *how* that preposition contributes to its meaning, one may never be able to determine exactly *how* it contributes. This is not a problem for exegesis, only for grammar. The goal of exegesis is to determine the meaning of sentences; it does not need, for its purposes, to determine how the syntax of the sentence is functioning to create that meaning. It is the task of the grammarian to worry about the latter.

It is entirely possible for two native speakers to have a different understanding of the semantic value of a preposition and yet never notice that they lack the same understanding. If the difference in how they understand the semantics of the preposition never results in a discernibly different interpretation of a sentences in which that preposition is used, the two native speakers will likely assume that they agree on the semantics of the preposition. Accordingly, they may have somewhat

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different notions of how the preposition is functioning, and yet never know that they do. This same thing can be true of other words in a language; but it is especially true of prepositions.

RESPONSE TO AN OBJECTION

Objection: In various crucial verses (Col. 1:16, John 1:10, Hebrews 1:2, and 1 Cor. 8:6) the Transcendent Monotheist interprets *dia* (+gen) as “with a view to” or something roughly along those lines. This reading is very close to “on account of.” However, the typical way for New Testament Greek to say “on account of” is to use *dia* (+accusative). Accordingly, if Paul was trying to assert, in those crucial verses, what the Transcendent Monotheist says he was trying to assert, he should have used *dia* (+acc) rather than *dia* (+gen). The fact that he used *dia* (+gen) serves as a clear indication that he decidedly did *not* mean to say “with a view to” or “on account of”?

RESPONSE—PART 1: What is true of prepositions in general is undoubtedly true (in Koine Greek) of which case is used for the object of the preposition. It is not likely that logic or semantics dictates the case used. Convention—the customary pattern of usage—dictates it. Accordingly, *dia*(+gen) and *dia*(+acc) don’t have a determinate meaning any more than *dia* itself does. *Dia*(+gen) and *dia*(+acc) do not “mean” anything so much as they are simply phrases used in particular conventional ways. This is not to say that they have not semantic value when they are used. But their semantic value is not dictated by some determinate and determinable field of meaning. Their semantic value is determined by more or less arbitrary convention.

RESPONSE—PART 2: I have to assume that there is some semantic difference between *dia*(+gen) and *dia*(+acc). That is not necessarily the case. We have seen that different prepositional constructions can be used to say the same thing. There are clear instances where a preposition followed by one case overlaps in meaning with that same preposition followed by another case. But, for the sake of argument, let us assume that there is a semantic difference between *dia*(+gen) and *dia*(+acc). I will indicate that difference this way:

Y *dia*(+acc) X = Y **on account of** X = e.g., the cosmos was created **on account of** Jesus;
and

Y *dia*(+gen) X = Y **with a view to** X = e.g., the cosmos was created **with a view to** Jesus;

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Something roughly like this could describe the difference between these two statements:

To say that God created the cosmos *with a view to* Jesus is tantamount to saying that Jesus is the very *raison d’etre* of the existence of the cosmos. It is the very reason why it came into existence at all. To say that God created the cosmos *on account of* Jesus is perhaps not tantamount to saying such a thing. ‘On account of’ could indicate that Jesus makes a contribution to why the cosmos came into existence without indicating that he is the very *raison d’etre* of it. So, for example, I could say, “I went fishing on account of the weather” without meaning that the weather was the sole and exclusive reason for my going fishing. There were also other reasons—I enjoy fishing, my freezer no longer had any fish in it, I am on a seafood diet, etc.

Consider this for example: Jesus came into the world *on account of* sin. This would not mean that sin was the *raison d’etre* for Jesus’ coming into the world. He had other reasons as well: to become King of Kings, to become King of the Jews, to be the image of the invisible God, etc.

In the light of all of the following—(1) my interpretation of the crucial verses, (2) my comments just above about *dia*, and (3) my earlier observations about prepositions in general—here is how I would answer the above objection:

In the passages in question, Paul is asserting that Jesus is the *raison d’etre* of the existence of the cosmos; he is the ultimate, original, defining purpose for the cosmos itself. I have to assume that when one wants to make such a claim, the conventional way for a Koine Greek speaker to say it would be to say, “the cosmos came into existence *dia*(+gen) Jesus.” Presumably, given that this is what Paul means to say, it would be contrary to a native speaker’s expectations if he said, “the cosmos came into existence *dia*(+acc) Jesus.” In other words, in order for Paul to mean what I have suggested he means, it would have sounded “odd” to the native speaker if he had said “the cosmos came into existence *dia*(+acc) Jesus.”

RESPONSE–PART 3: Ultimately, to have any sort of sense as to why this wouldn’t sound right (and to have any confidence in our conclusion that it wouldn’t), we would have to be native speakers. Only for the sake of illustration, then (I do not know this; I have not researched this; and I am not proposing that this is actually so!), imagine that the following reflects the pattern of Koine Greek usage:

Y *dia*(+acc) X = Y *on account of* X is, by convention, used when X is temporally prior to Y. That is, when X is temporally before Y and provides the reason or basis for it.

So, for example, if

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Y = the stilling of the stormy lake; and
X = the command of Jesus

The command of Jesus [X] occurred before the stilling of the stormy lake [Y].

So, according to this imagined convention,
"The stilling of the stormy lake occurred *on account of* the command of Jesus."

And, according to this convention, this would be rendered
"The stilling of the stormy lake occurred *dia(+acc)* the command of Jesus."

Y *dia(+gen)* X = Y *with a view to* X is, by convention, used when X is temporally posterior to Y. That is, when X is temporally after Y and yet provides the reason or basis for it.

So, for example, if

Y = Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem; and
X = Jesus' dying on the cross

The death of Jesus on the cross [X] occurred after his final journey to Jerusalem [Y].

So according to this possible convention,
"Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem occurred *with a view to* Jesus' dying on the cross."

So, according to my assumptions, this would be rendered
"Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem occurred *dia(+gen)* Jesus' dying on the cross."

Now, *if such a distinction did capture the conventional pattern of usage* (but I am not suggesting that I know it does), a native speaker would "hear" *dia(+acc)* instead of *dia(+gen)* in those crucial verses listed above as a departure from conventional usage—if those verses mean what I have proposed they mean. It would not sound "right" to the native speaker—not because it is logically impossible for *dia(+acc)* to mean "with a view to," but because it just isn't done. There is ultimately not answer as to why it isn't done. It just isn't. It is merely a matter of convention.

The ultimate point I am making does not hinge on my having accurately described the actual convention of Koine Greek. My point is that every language has conventions. Whatever the convention is exactly, there can be no reason to rule out the possibility that a native speaker who wanted to say, "The world was created *with a view to* Jesus," would have said "The world was created *dia(+gen)* Jesus." It is not necessary for us to be able to discern why *dia(+gen)* is appropriate rather than *dia(+acc)* in order to accept it as a possibility. To dogmatically assert that, in order to mean what I have proposed, Paul

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necessarily would have written, “The world was created *dia(+acc)* Jesus,” is unfounded.

In any case, *it is to presume a knowledge of Koine Greek that is not even possible for a non-native speaker* to have, if one advances the argument of the above objection. The objection maintains that, because “all things existing *with a view to* Jesus” and “all things existing *on account of* Jesus” seem—*to us*— to be equivalent, it follows that Paul would have had to use *dia(+acc)* if that is what he had meant to say. We are in no position to dogmatically maintain that that is the case. And, indeed, if my exegesis of the crucial verses is right, then obviously it is false!