

Quine on Ontology

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The Riddle of Non-Being

- In a dispute over ontology, what there is, one side seems at a disadvantage.
- McX can say that I fail to acknowledge the existence of certain entities.
- But I cannot say that there are some things that McX claims to exist but do not.
 - To do so would be to contradict myself by holding that there are some things that do not exist.
- This is the riddle of non-being that goes back to Plato.
 - “Nonbeing must in some sense be, otherwise what is there that there is not?” (2).
- “Plato’s Beard” has frequently dulled “Occam’s Razor.”

A Confusion

- What motivates ontologists like McX to assert the existence of Pegasus and the like is a confusion.
- They think that if we are to talk about Pegasus, Pegasus must be.
- Yet they are not willing to concede that a flesh-and-blood flying horse exists anywhere in space-time.
- So they retreat to the claim that what we talk about is something like a Pegasus-idea.
- But the idea of a thing is quite distinct from the thing itself, and it would be a confusion to think otherwise.
 - The Parthenon is physical,
 - The Parthenon-idea is mental.
- McX and his kind are willing to indulge in this confusion to preserve the being of Pegasus.

Unactualized Possibles

- The confusion of a thing with its idea can be avoided by adopting a more sophisticated theory of Pegasus.
- An ontologist we will call “Wyman” views Pegasus as a possible being which is unactualized.
- To say that there is no such thing as Pegasus is to say that Pegasus lacks the attribute of actuality.
- This is similar to saying of the Parthenon that it lacks the attribute of being red.
- The being of Pegasus and the Parthenon are then unquestioned.

Denying Existence

- Wyman attempts to be agreeable by denying that Pegasus exists.
- But he denies the existence of Pegasus for the wrong reasons.
- In the common sense usage of “exists,” when we deny existence we deny that there is any such thing at all.
- We deny that Pegasus exists because:
 - There is no Pegasus in space-time,
 - It is a fact specific to Pegasus that if Pegasus existed, then he would be in space-time.
- For Wyman, the problem is different:
 - There is no Pegasus in space-time,
 - Anything which existed would be in space-time.
- But the second claim is contradicted by the existence of numbers like the cube root of 27.

A Slum of Possibles

- Wyman’s universe of actualized and unactualized possibles is over-populated.
- It offends the aesthetic sensibilities of those who have a taste for desert landscapes.
- More importantly, it is disorderly, raising difficult questions about the identity of unactualized possibles.
 - Are the possible fat man and the possible bald man in the doorway the same or distinct, and how are we to decide?

- How many possible fat men in the doorway are there, and how does their number compare with that of possible thin men in the doorway?
- Does their being alike make them one or not?
- Does the concept of identity even apply to them?
- It seems to make no sense of talking about entities “which cannot meaningfully be said to be identical with themselves and distinct from one another” (4).

Impossibility

- If Wyman’s strategy is to be completely general, it would have to grant being to the round square cupola on Berkeley College.
- But such a being is impossible, which leaves only two options:
 - To admit that there are unactualized impossibles,
 - To claim that the expression “the round square cupola” is meaningless.
- The first approach threatens contradiction, so Wyman embraces the second.
- But it has no intrinsic appeal, and has even led its proponents to challenge the argument-form *reductio ad absurdum*, which may be a *reductio* against the view itself.
- Due to a result by Church in symbolic logic, it would be impossible to determine systematically which expressions are contradictory and hence meaningless.

Russell’s Partial Solution

- Russell solves the problem of non-being for a limited class of expressions: definite descriptions.
- We have already seen that Russell analyzes whole sentences containing the descriptions, rather than the descriptions themselves.
- The descriptive phrase no longer carries the burden of reference.
- It is shifted to quantificational words (“bound variables”) such as “something,” “nothing,” “everything.”
- Such words “do not purport to be names at all; they refer to entities generally, with a kind of studied ambiguity peculiar to themselves” (6).
- One can meaningfully assert that, e.g., the author of *Waverly* does not exist without taking the description to refer to any kind of entity.

Generalizing Russell's Solution

- Russell's solution to the problem of non-being applies only to descriptive phrases, but it can be generalized to apply to proper names.
- We can substitute a description for a name such as "Pegasus."
 - "The winged horse captured by Bellerophon."
- If there is no such analysis available, we can use various devices to the same effect:
 - "The thing that is-Pegasus,"
 - "The thing that pegasizes."
- Quine voices no objection to the possibility that he is committed to there being attributes such as *being Pegasus* or *pegasizing*.

Meaning and Naming

- The confusion behind the problem of non-being might have been avoided had the ontologists recognized a distinction between meaning and naming.
- In Frege's example, "Morning Star" and "Evening Star" name the same thing but have different meanings.
 - Otherwise, one could have learned the identity of what the two expression name simply by reflecting on their meanings.
- The urge to find an entity for "Pegasus" to name for it to be meaningful may well have been responsible for the view that "Pegasus" must name an idea in order to have meaning.

Universals

- McX thinks that there are *universals*: such entities as attributes, relations, classes, numbers and functions.
- He may argue, for example, that from the fact that there are red houses, red roses, and red sunsets, it follows that there is something in common: redness.
- This fact reflects McX's "conceptual scheme," within which the being of redness is trivial.
- "Ontological statements follow immediately from all manner of casual statements of commonplace fact" (10).
- But one can without loss of explanatory power have a conceptual scheme in which there is nothing in common between red houses, roses, and sunsets.
- The fact that "red" is true of all of them is in this scheme "ultimate and irreducible."

Meanings

- Even if attributes are not admitted in a conceptual scheme, it seems at least that the universals *meanings* must be retained.
- If an expression is to be meaningful, it must have a meaning.
- But it could be allowed that expressions are meaningful, and that meaningfulness (or “significance”) is either:
 - “An ultimate and unanalyzable matter of fact,” or
 - A matter of how people behave in the presence of linguistic utterances.
- We can operate with the notions of “significance” and “synonymy” while dispensing with “special and irreducible intermediary entities” (12).

Ontological Commitment

- The use of names does not commit us to corresponding entities, nor does the use of predicates commit us to corresponding attributes or meanings.
- But we do not altogether avoid ontological commitment in our use of language.
- The use of quantificational words (“bound variables”) does engender a commitment.
 - I am committed to attributes when I say, “There is something which red houses and sunsets have in common.”
 - I am committed to numbers when I say, “There is a prime number larger than a million.”
- This is the only way in which use of language brings with it ontological commitment.
- “To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable” (13).

Mathematical Entities

- Contemporary debates about the ontology of mathematics replicate the debates in the Middle Ages about universals.
 - Realism (there are universals): logicism, which makes all kinds of abstract entities the values of bound variables.
 - Conceptualism (universals are mind-made): intuitionism, which requires that abstract entities be “constructed,” and limits mathematics.
 - Nominalism (there are no universals): formalism, which regards mathematics as “a play of insignificant notations” (15).
- “The sort of ontology we adopt can be consequential—notably in connection with mathematics, though this is only an example” (15).

The Semantical Plane

- Looking at the values of variables only reveals what our language commits us to, not what there is.
- Still, it is best to approach the question of what there is by “withdrawing to a semantical plane” (16).
- On the semantical level, one can describe disagreements with rival ontologies by characterizing the statements that the rivals affirm, without being committed to the entities to which they are committed.
- The semantical level serves as a common ground of communication for people with rival conceptual schemes.
- This at least delays the collapse of the debate into question-begging.

Accepting an Ontology

- Accepting an ontology is like accepting a scientific theory.
- “We adopt, at least insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged” (16).
- For example, we can arrange our experience according to (at least) one of two schemes:
 - Physicalist: simplifying by talking about physical objects responsible for the regularity of experience,
 - Phenomenalist: simplifying by reducing the kinds of entities to “individual subjective events of sensation or reflection” (17).

Convenient Myths

- From the point of view of phenomenism, the postulation of physical objects is no more than a simplifying myth.
- By analogy, from the standpoint of a theory of rational numbers, the postulation of irrational numbers is a myth that simplifies the theory.
- From the standpoint of physicalism, the postulation of numbers and other abstract entities is a higher simplifying myth.
- This is illustrated by the *ad hoc* devices used to overcome paradoxes of set-theory.
- And there are paradoxes of physical theory (wave/particle theories of light, Heisenberg’s indeterminacy principle) which expose the mythical character of physics.

And the Winner Is?

- Quine has isolated the linguistic device that indicates ontological commitment, but he has far from settled what we ought to be committed to.
- Competing schemes with their ontological commitments ought to be explored with “tolerance and an experimental spirit” (19).
- The phenomenalist scheme claims epistemological priority, and from its point of view, the physicalist and mathematical schemes are myths.
- But the epistemological point of view is itself simply one of many, “corresponding to one among our various interests and purposes” (19)
- The unstated conclusion is that no point of view can claim ultimate priority over the others, and that adoption of a conceptual scheme is pragmatic.