

PHIL 4603: Metaphysics
Prof. Funkhouser
Quine, “On What There Is”

I. On What There Isn't

The Platonic Riddle of Non-Being (Plato's Beard): How can we talk about that which does not exist (e.g., Pegasus)? What *is* it that does not exist?

- McX: Pegasus exists as an idea in our minds. (Otherwise, our talk about Pegasus would be meaningless.)

- Quine's Objection to McX: The idea of Pegasus is not the same thing as Pegasus. Pegasus would be a spatial object, with the properties of ordinary objects. Our idea of Pegasus lacks such features.

- Wyman: Pegasus is an “unactualized possible.” Wyman says that Pegasus does not exist, because Pegasus is not actual. But, Pegasus still *is* (i.e., has being) as an unactualized possible. Wyman says that Pegasus subsists, but does not exist.

- Wyman represents the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong. Meinong is best-known for his distinction between two types of being. First, there are ordinary objects in the spatio-temporal world that are said to exist. Second, there non-actual objects that nevertheless *subsist*. Such objects include Pegasus. Meinong would say that Pegasus does not exist, but still has being in virtue of subsisting.

- Quine's Objections to Wyman:

1. Quine thinks that we should not multiply senses of ‘exist’ and its close cognates. We should just think of things being (existing) *period*.
2. There would be an explosion of possible entities (this goes against the “desert landscape” aesthetic), and how in the world would they be individuated (e.g., Is the possible fat man in the corner identical to the possible bald man in the corner)?

Quine: Limit modal talk to whole statements, but do not talk about modal (e.g., possible) entities.

Q: Quine also says that the main motive for admitting possible entities is to handle Plato's Beard. But is this right? What other work might possible entities do? (David Lewis puts *possibilia* to many more uses in his *On the Plurality of Worlds*.)

3. How does Wyman make sense of our talk about impossible entities (e.g., the round square)? Answer: Wyman claims that such talk is meaningless. Talk that is meaningless is just gibberish, and can be neither true nor false.

Q: Are contradictions really *meaningless*? If so, is it not legitimate to argue by *reductio*?

- If McX and Wyman are wrong, then how does Quine deal with Plato's Beard? He endorses Russell's theory of descriptions.

◦ Russell's theory of descriptions: 'The author of *Waverley* was a poet' means 'Something wrote *Waverley* and was a poet, and nothing else wrote *Waverley*.' This can be generalized as follows:

$$\exists x(WWx \ \& \ Px \ \& \ \forall y(WWy \rightarrow y=x))$$

Here, 'WW' is a predicate meaning "wrote *Waverley*" and 'P' is a predicate meaning "is a poet."

◦ A benefit of this type of analysis is that names can be paraphrased away so that we do not need to worry about unactualized possibles. Take, for example, the sentence 'The present King of France is bald.' Using Russell's method this means 'Something is the King of France and is bald, and nothing else is the King of France.' There is no King of France, but sentences with this phrase are meaningful because we can paraphrase them in this manner. On Russell's method it is false, not meaningless, that 'The present King of France is bald.' Similarly, we could substitute a description for 'Pegasus' to analyze sentences about Pegasus. This is a solution to Plato's Beard that is better than that offered by either McX or Wyman.

◦ Quine's verdict about Plato's beard:

We need no longer labor under the delusion that the meaningfulness of a statement containing a singular term presupposes an entity named by the term. A singular term need not name to be significant. (7)

Distinguish: *meaning* and *naming*. ‘Evening Star’ and ‘Morning Star’ name the same thing, but have different meanings. Recall Kripke here.

II. Universals and Ontology

- Note: Quine’s use of ‘universal’ is different than ours (ours is more traditional). E.g., Quine uses ‘universal’ to cover classes, which are not repeatable.

- McX: Red houses, roses, sunsets, etc. have something in common — the attribute (i.e., property) *redness*. So, attributes surely exist. These attributes, universals, are the meanings of predicates like ‘red.’

- Note:

McX cannot argue that predicates such as ‘red’ or ‘is-red’, which we all concur in using, must be regarded as names each of a single universal entity in order that they be meaningful at all. For we have seen that being a name of something is a much more special feature than being meaningful. (8)

- Quine’s objections to McX on universals:

1. Quine denies that meanings exist (as abstract entities, in particular). The meaningfulness (or *significance*, as Quine calls it) of utterances might be unanalyzable, or it might be analyzed in terms of behavioral dispositions.
2. We can make true statements about objects and their attributes without committing ourselves to the existence of such attributes. To see this we must first understand what Quine has to say about *ontological commitment* in general.

Ontological Commitment: An ontological commitment is a commitment to the existence of something. Quine writes the following about ontological commitment: “But this is, essentially, the *only* way we can involve ourselves in ontological commitments: by our use of bound variables.” (9) Russell’s method shows us that we are not committed to the existence of a thing corresponding to each meaningful name or predicate.

Quine’s Slogan about Ontological Commitment: “To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable.” (9)

- Quine claims that we do not need to assume the existence of universals in our ontology in order to make sentences about things and their attributes meaningful and true. See the example about dogs and *whiteness*.
- Note: There is an escape clause. We are not committed to an entity if we can paraphrase statements referring to that entity into statements not referring to that entity, while preserving meaning.
- Quine states that mathematicians are committed to the existence of lots of abstract entities — numbers, etc. He also makes a parallel between the problem of universals and the foundation of mathematics.
- Q: How are we to select an ontology?
- Quine's answer:

Our acceptance of an ontology is, I think, similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory, say a system of physics: 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. (10)
- But, 'simplicity' is ambiguous — see the example of a phenomenological vs. physicalist ontology.
- In the end, Quine states that we should take an attitude of “tolerance and an experimental spirit” to determine which ontology to adopt.