

PHIL 4603: Metaphysics  
Prof. Funkhouser  
Quine, “Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis”

I.

- Q: How does a thing, such as a person, maintain its identity through a change (sometimes complete) in its parts? This is Heraclitus’s problem.

Quine’s answer: “The truth is that you *can* bathe in the same *river* twice, but not in the same river stage.” (284) In other words, Quine accepts temporal parts. In this case, the relevant relation that holds among the temporal parts is *river kinship*. When we “point” to one river stage and then “point” to another and claim an identity, we must be referring to a temporally extended thing that includes these stages as parts.

Ordinary things are temporally extended, so, to that extent, they are event-like.

- “Pointing”, and using words in general, necessarily involves ambiguities of reference — e.g., what is the temporal and spatial extent of the thing pointed to? Learning here, as elsewhere, is a matter of induction.

II.

- Quine notes a similarity between this inductive process and our learning of general terms, like ‘red’, by induction. Compare this with his discussion in “Natural Kinds”.

- There are obvious advantages, having to do with simplicity for example, to positing 4-dimensional things in addition to their stages. This is similar to the practical advantages of positing spatially extended things, in addition to spatial simples.

III.

- Hypothesis: Perhaps kinds, like red, are simply the sum of their instances. Compare: Ordinary things are the sum of their stages. But this does not work in general. This is the point of Quine’s geometry example.

Therefore we come to recognize two different types of association: that of concrete parts in a concrete whole, and that of concrete instances in an abstract universal. We come to recognize a divergence between two senses of 'is': 'This is Cayster' versus 'This is square'. (288)

IV.

- Quine asserts his Nominalism, holding that there needn't be a referent for 'square' (considered as an attribute or universal). No such ontological commitment is required:

No more need be demanded, in explication of 'is square' or any other phrase, than that our listener learn when to expect us to apply it to an object and when not; there is no need for the phrase itself to be a name in turn of a separate object of any kind. (288)

V.

- Quine lauds our acquisition of general terms, but not necessarily our acquisition of abstract singular terms. The former is ontologically innocent, but the latter is not.