

Quine, "On What There Is"

1.

Ontology: the study of what is, of the kinds and structures of the objects, properties and relations in reality.

We did some ontology when studying Wittgenstein. We discussed his various ontological commitments—i.e. commitments to simple objects, atomic facts, etc.

We're going to do some more with Quine.

Quine: "Let's first look at some examples of ontological disagreement. By doing so, we can get a better sense of what ontological commitment amounts to. Then I will present a criterion of ontological commitment."

2.

The Puzzle of Non-Being (of Negative Existentials)

The puzzle: it looks as if no negative existential statement can be true.

Consider: 'Santa Claus does not exist'

Clearly this sentence is meaningful and, we think, true. If I claim that Santa Claus does not exist, then what am I talking about, if not Santa Claus (i.e. some guy / thing)? But, if I am talking about Santa Claus, then Santa Claus exists.

McX: to say that Santa Claus doesn't exist is to say that Santa Claus is a mere idea, not a flesh and blood man.

Wyman: to say that Santa Claus doesn't exist is to say that Santa Claus is merely possible, not actual. That is, Santa Claus lacks property of being actual.

Problems with McX's view:

- The idea of a thing is quite different from the thing itself and it would be a confusion to think otherwise.
- McX have to accept this kind of confusion.

Problems with Wyman's view:

- Wyman's universe of actualized and unactualized possibles is too crowded! "It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes".
- The view raises some tough questions: Are the possible fat man in the doorway and the possible bald man in the doorway the same or distinct? How many possible fat men are there in the doorway? Does the concept of identity apply to unactualized possibles?
- What about impossibles, such as the round square cupola? Wyman has two options: (1) embrace unactualized impossibles, or (2) admit that 'the round square cupola' is meaningless. Wyman goes for (2). But (2) is questionable, according to Quine.

McX, and Wyman disagree about ontological commitment: ...about how to read off what someone believes in from what they believe that.

E.g. If I believe that Santa Claus exists, then I believe in a fat, bearded man who lives at the North Pole.

That is, I am committed to a fat, bearded man who lives at the North Pole.

Russell's partial solution:

Russell solved the problem for definite descriptions.

We learned about a way of solving the riddle of non-being, using the existential quantifier (\exists).

If you formulate negative existentials using \exists , there's no longer the temptation to conclude that in some sense the present King of France exists.

When I say that the present King of France doesn't exist, what I want to say is something like this:

$\sim (\exists x)(x \text{ is a present King of France})$

McX confuses this with:

$(\exists x)(x \text{ is a present King of France and } x \text{ is an idea})$

Generalizing Russell:

Russell's move can be generalized to proper names—e.g. 'Santa Claus' and 'Pegasus'.

Two options:

- (i) We can substitute a definite description for 'Pegasus'.
E.g. 'The winged horse captured by Bellerophon'.
- (ii) If there is no definite description available, then we can appeal to the following properties:
E.g. 'The thing that is-pegasus'.
'The thing that pegasizes'.

3. Meaning and Naming

Any confusion motivating the puzzle of non-being might have been avoided if McX and Wyman (and, indeed, all ontologists) had recognized the distinction between meaning and naming.

How can we draw attention this distinction with Frege's 'Morning Star' and 'Evening Star' example?

The urge to find an entity for 'Pegasus' to name in order to be meaningful may have been behind the view that 'Pegasus' must name a weird kind of entity.

4. Universals

McX: there are universal: attributes, relations, classes (sets), numbers and functions.

McX is a *realist*.

There are red houses, red roses and red sunsets; all of these things have something in common—the universal REDNESS.

But there are also *nominalists*: nominalists claim that these things resemble each other, but they don't think that that commits them to universals.

To the nominalist: "Surely there must be the universal MEANING."

5. Ontological Commitment

Quine has shown us: the use of names does not commit us to corresponding entities. And the use of predicates does not commit us to corresponding attributes or meanings.

A criterion of ontological commitment:

Simply stated: You're committed to what there has to be, in order for what you're saying to be true.

Formally stated: "To be is to be the value of a bound variable."