

Quine Notes

PHIL312

Prof. Oakes

Winthrop University

Negative Existential Statements

- A negative existential claim is one denying the existence of some thing: e.g., 'Pegasus does not exist' and 'There are no round squares.'
- Such claims have puzzled philosophers, because they seem to involve reference to the very thing whose existence is denied.
 - o If 'Pegasus' refers to nothing at all, then in saying 'Pegasus does not exist' I should express no determinate proposition. I.e., my statement has *no meaning* at all.
 - o On the other hand, if 'Pegasus' does refer to something, then it would seem that Pegasus does exist, after all.
 - o So, the challenge is to provide an analysis of negative existentials that avoids postulating the existence of non-entities without loss of semantic content.
- Quine first considers two general theories that seek to resolve the problem, neither of which Quine thinks attractive.
- The "McX" account: non-entities are ideas.
 - o To fail to exist: to be a mere idea
 - o To exist: (unanalyzed)
 - o Difficulty: non-entities are not ideas, per se. That is, if the referent of 'Pegasus' were an idea, then Pegasus would have the properties of an idea: he would be immaterial, invisible, etc. But this is false: Pegasus is a flying horse, not *the idea of* a flying horse. (Compare: 'The Parthenon exists.' 'The Parthenon' refers to an object made of stone. Were that object to be destroyed, 'The Parthenon' would still refer to an object made of stone: otherwise, in saying 'The Parthenon no longer exists,' we should be saying that some immaterial, invisible object no longer exists.)
- The "Wyman" account: non-entities are unactualized possibilities.
 - o To fail to exist: to lack the property of *actuality*
 - o To exist: to have the property of actuality
 - o Difficulty: "ontology bloat." Whether a thing has or lacks the property *actuality*, it must nevertheless in some sense "exist" in order to do so. In other words, we have a confusion of the meaning of 'exist': Wyman suggests that we restrict the predicate *exists* to actualized possibilities; non-actualized possibilities may be said – what? – to *subsist*? But if this does not simply mean "exist", then 'Pegasus' will have no referent.

Russell's theory of singular descriptions

- Having dismissed the above two accounts as unsatisfactory, Quine then turns to an avenue of thought that he thinks will solve the problem. This line of thought begins with Russell's theory of singular descriptions.
- The problem, on this view, lies in supposing singular terms like 'Pegasus' to refer to some object. Russell analyzes singular referring terms as general terms or, in other words, as predicates. That is, as a description, the singular term simply describes a potential object, and if some object answers that description, then we may speak truly of that object. Otherwise, if no object answers the description, then the statement in question turns out to be false.
- Singular descriptions
 - Expressions such as 'the author of *Waverley*', 'the present King of France', and 'the round square cupola on Berkeley College' are *singular referring descriptions* – expressions that refer to a single entity by describing that entity uniquely.
 - On Russell's account, such expressions are meaningful only in the context of a full statement. Otherwise, they are "incomplete symbols", with neither meaning nor reference. (Typically, we find such expressions in the context of a full statement, or implicitly provide the context of a full statement in considering them, Russell thinks.)
 - Consider, then, 'The present King of France is bald.' Since there is at present no King of France, one might wonder how this sentence can have a truth-value: if it lacks one, then presumably it is meaningless; but, surely, it is a meaningful statement.
 - On Russell's analysis, however, the above statement is *false*. He construes it as follows: Something is the present King of France (and only that thing is the present King of France¹) and that thing is bald.
 - The substantive ("noun"), 'the present King of France' is transformed into a predicate: being the present King of France.
 - To achieve reference (to something in the world), Russell employs the existential quantifier: something (or 'some x ' or ' $\exists x$ '). This term, as Quine points out, refers to entities generally (by ranging over a certain domain of discourse).
 - That is, 'The present King of France is bald' becomes on this analysis ' $\exists x(Kx \ \& \ Bx)$ '² where ' Kx ' means " x is the present King of France" and ' Bx ' means " x is bald."
 - Since there is no object satisfying this conjoined predicate, the sentence is false.

¹ This 'only...' phrase is necessary because the definite article 'the' implies that there is only one present king of France.

² This expression is read as follows: there is an x such that x is the present King of France and x is bald. Since there is no x (no thing) that satisfies these predicates, the statement is false.

- Applied to Pegasus
 - Quine offers two ways of resolving the issue where Pegasus is concerned. One is to replace the name 'Pegasus' with a description, the other is to treat "Pegasus" itself as a predicate. These strategies amount to the same thing, since both involve replacing the referring term with a descriptive predicate.
 - On the first suggestion, we might replace 'Pegasus' with something like 'the winged horse captured by Bellerophon'. In this case, denying the existence of Pegasus would amount to this: there is no x such that x is a winged horse captured by Bellerophon (and x is the only thing that is a winged horse captured by Bellerophon).³ This statement comes out true, and avoids reference to any non-entity, because it denies, of each thing that does exist, that it is a winged horse captured by Bellerophon – which general denial is true.
 - The other suggestion is simply to invent (or, anyway, employ) a predicate special to the supposed identity of Pegasus (sometimes called an individual concept or *haecceity*). That is, on the supposition that Pegasus is a unique individual (should he exist), we may conceive *being Pegasus* to be a unique attribute; and where we have such a property, we can speak of the verb *pegasizing*. Anything that "pegasizes" will be Pegasus.
 - To deny the existence of Pegasus is now unproblematic. 'Pegasus does not exist' becomes 'It is not the case that there is an x such that x pegasizes.' I.e., $\sim(\exists x)Px$.
 - This expression implies the existence of no non-entity. It tells us, as the variable ranges over the universal domain of discourse, that each such thing in the domain fails to satisfy the predicate *pegasizes*.
- Russell's theory is widely held to be one of the great achievements in recent philosophy. It provides an analysis of the semantical structure of a declarative statement – one, moreover, that may provide a simple, elegant solution to a long-standing conundrum. The problem of negative existentials is thus seen as a product of imperfect understanding of sentence-logic.

Meaning and reference

- Quine thinks that a clue to the errors of McX and Wyman lies in the distinction between names and meaning.
- A *name* refers to some entity or thing, while a *meaningful* expression expresses some idea (let us say).
 - As a name, 'the Evening Star' refers to Venus (as does the name 'Venus');
 - As a name, 'the Morning Star' refers also to Venus.
 - The two terms, however, express different ideas – their meanings are not the same, even though their reference is.
 - Hence, a name is not the same thing as a meaning.

³ In symbols: $\sim(\exists x)Wx$, where 'Wx' is read 'x is a winged horse captured by Bellerophon.'

- Failure to distinguish naming from meaning could, perhaps, lead a theorist (such as McX) to think that the word ‘Pegasus’ referred to an idea (i.e., as a name); but, as above, while the *meaning* of the term ‘Pegasus’ may itself be an idea, the thing referred to, if it existed, would be no idea.

“To be is to be the value of a bound variable.”

- What does this expression mean, exactly?⁴
- The point of Quine’s discussion of Pegasus is to show that our linguistic forms are “indeterminate”, and that we need a more precise, formal language for stating clearly our “ontological commitments” – i.e., the ontology to which the truth of our statements commits us.
 - o Generally, expressions such as ‘the rose is red’ and even ‘Pegasus exists’ don’t by themselves commit us to the existence of anything, for we can always replace a term that appears to *name* something with a *descriptive* expression. An expression of the form ‘something pegasizes’ doesn’t tell us much about which things we must understand to exist.
 - o The predicate ‘is a rose’ does commit us to an ontology containing roses. But note that this predicate could be replaced with another, along the lines of “pegasizing” – “rosifies” – which doesn’t commit us to the existence of roses.
 - o Thus, if it is true that “some rose is red”, then this statement by itself doesn’t commit us to a particular ontology. For, this statement could be written formally in either of the following ways:
 - S1. $\exists x|x \text{ is a rose and } x \text{ is red.}$
 - S2. $\exists x|x \text{ rosifies and } x \text{ is red.}$
 - o S1 commits us to the existence of roses, but S2 doesn’t commit us to the existence of anything.
- Quine makes this point more forcefully in the context of the question of universals. Universals include such things as properties, relations, classes, numbers, etc. It has long been disputed whether such things exist, and one area where the dispute may be carried out is that of mathematics.
 - o Logicism is the mathematical view according to which numbers, functions, etc. are *real* and *mind-independent*, which is to adopt a *realist* view with respect to these universals.
 - o Intuitionism is the view according to which the objects of mathematics are real but *mind-dependent*, which is to adopt a *conceptualist* stance with regard to them.
 - o Formalism is the view that the various objects of mathematics are not, in fact, objects at all. This is a form of *nominalism* about such objects. The

⁴ A variable is “bound” when it falls under the scope of a quantifier; otherwise, we are left with an “open sentence” without meaning. Thus, ‘ $(\exists x)Rx$ ’ is a closed and meaningful sentence, while ‘ Rx ’ is not. (The former may be read, “Something is red”, while the latter is simply the phrase “is red” since range the variable x isn’t defined if unbound by a quantifier.)

statements of mathematics, on this view, are not *meaningful* and neither true nor false. Mathematics is simply a set of rules for composing such statements, but is not about anything real.

- Quine's point, here, is that first the various truths of mathematics don't commit one to any of these three ontologies. It's being true that $2 + 2 = 4$ won't tell us whether there is such a thing as the number 2, or whether it is mind-dependent. We may indicate a belief in logicism, intuitionism, or formalism by expressing such a truth with the appropriate predicates in a formal, quantified language.⁵

Semantics and Simplicity

- Semantic ascent: Quine suggests that differences in ontology may be made more clear by use of the resources developed by Russell. This involves turning our attention to our language – what we mean by one term or another. This Quine calls “semantic ascent” – moving from a direct discussion of which things exist (universals, etc.) to a discussion of how we should interpret our terms, especially where this involves making clear our ontological commitments.
- A significant factor in deciding ontological issues, Quine thinks, is simplicity. “[W]e 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).
- However, simplicity may not by itself demand one ontology or another. Two primary competitors are what Quine calls the “physicalist conceptual scheme” and the “phenomenalist” conceptual scheme. The former makes for a simple ontology insofar as a variety of phenomena may be ordered around a relatively simpler set of physical objects (- think of the various images that one has of a single penny). The latter, however, is epistemologically simpler, on Quine's view, rooted as it is, presumably, in basic terms of my-experience-of-this and my-experience-of-that.
- Quine allows that the physicalist conception, rooted in physical objects, may be regarded as a “convenient myth” (18), just as may realism about mathematical universals, from a formalist point of view. Which conceptual scheme we choose, finally, for Quine, is also a matter of “our various interests and purposes” (19). In this respect, Quine may be regarded as skeptical of an ultimate ontology, one demonstrably correct.

Appendix: further notes on ontological commitment

- Consider, further, our talk of properties. We speak of various things being red: houses, roses, sunsets, etc. Does such talk commit us to belief in *redness*? Are there such things as properties? Universals?
 - o One might think (following McX) that we must acknowledge the existence of universals such as *redness* if we are to explain how it is that both of the following sentences are true: ‘This house is red’ and ‘This rose is red.’

⁵ Roughly, the difference would be specified with predicates such as ‘is a number’, ‘is mind-dependent’, ‘is a rule’, etc.

That is, it is their instantiating (having) *redness* that explains their truth: both statements are true because the two objects are similar in respect of sharing a property; so we must recognize the existence of redness, the thing shared.

- Russell's analysis makes clear, however, that we are not obviously committed to this view. For on his account, the term 'red' needn't be represented as referring to anything. We can, that is, render 'some rose is red' by either of the following:
 - S3: $\exists x \exists y | x \text{ is a rose and } y \text{ is an instance of redness and } x \text{ has } y$
 - S4: $\exists x | x \text{ is a rose and } x \text{ is red}$
- S3 commits us to the existence of some thing, redness, while S4 does not.
- Notice that the predicate 'is red' does not by itself carry any particular ontological commitment. It may be that in order for a thing to be red, there must exist some thing, *redness*, in which case S3 would be a more perspicuous symbolization. But, by itself, saying that something is red does not have this implication. In order to get that implication, we would need to develop an account of what it is to be red, which account, presumably, would make clear the ontological commitment of use of the predicate.
- What about the sentence 'Red is a color'? Does this not commit us to an ontology of properties? Quine might reply that that sentence is true only in virtue of houses and roses satisfying the predicates 'is red' and 'is colored'. I.e., 'red is a color' is reducible to 'This house is red and colored,' 'This rose is red and colored', 'This sunset is red and colored', etc.