

Quine on Some Ontological Commitments: An Analytical Review

Author details: Name- Neelanjana Chowdhury, Status- Ph.D. Scholar at The University of Burdwan in Philosophy State: West Bengal, Country: India. E-mail id. - mailboxtonc@gmail.com

Abstract:

Willard Van Orman Quine is an empiricist in strict sense. Quine criticizes some ontological views which are concerned with the admission of subsistent entity or non existing entity in the world to explain the meaningfulness of some sentences, or the admission of unactualized possible entity etc. I write this paper followed by Quine's essay 'On What There Is' where Quine criticizes these ontological views.

This essay of Quine is about the criticism of some ontological commitment. The etymological meaning of the term 'ontology' is the study of being, of there is. An ontologist asks: what entities or kinds of entity exist? So ontology means discussion about the basic kinds of things in the world.

At the beginning of the essay 'On What There Is', Quine says, 'A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo- Saxon monosyllables: 'What there is?''¹ Quine points that the answer is 'Everything – and everyone² will accept this answer as true.'

In this connection, Quine discusses two ontological theories, one is, for him, the theory of MCX; another is the theory of Wyman. Some philosophers talked about non-existing entity, like Meinong, early Russell. They claim that when we say 'Pegasus does not exist', we meaningfully assert that the subsistent entity Pegasus is not really existent, they do not claim that Pegasus is a physical, spatio- temporal entity, but rather an idea

On the other hand, there are some philosophers who admit possible objects in order to explain possible world semantics. According to them object of possible world are not actual. They are stipulated objects.

In this paper I will critically discuss these two ontological theories and Quine's reactions on them.

Key words: Ontological commitment, Negative existential, Possible object, Possible world, Wyman philosophers, McX Philosophers.

I.View of MCX philosophers:

First group of philosopher named MCX, an imaginary philosopher introduced by Quine in his essay 'On What There Is'. The philosophic view claims that corresponding object to the use of every singular term e.g., a proper name and as giving that term its meaning, there is an entity having some type of being, though not necessarily one of actual space-time existence.

MCX maintains there is something. It is some such line of thought that leads philosophers like MCX to impute being where they might otherwise be quite content to recognize that there is nothing. For example, if Pegasus were not, MCX argues, we should not be talking about anything when we use the word; therefore it would be nonsense to say even that Pegasus is not. This problem is connected to the problem of negative existential statements.

The problem of negative existential involves non- denoting or empty terms. Such negative existential as 'Pegasus does not exist', 'The round square does not exist' have been a constant problem to the classical logicians since classical logic is based upon the existential presupposition that all singular terms have denotation i.e., they are non-empty. Various suggestions have, therefore, been made to tackle the problem of such negative existentials.

We do often make assertions denying the existence of something e.g., 'Pegasus does not exist', 'The round square does not exist', 'Unicorn does not exist' etc. These are negative existential assertions which are called negative existential. In all such statements we apparently refer to the non-existent. Here the problem is: how can we say that 'The round square does not exist' is about round square when there is no round square for it to be about? And if it is said to be about round square how can such an assertion be true? For what it asserts is that the round square does not exist. But it is obvious that such negative existential as 'The round square does not exist' are significant and true. Negative existential would thus rise to puzzles. They would give rise to puzzles since the subject terms involved in them do not have any reference.

1. W.V.O.Quine, 'On What There Is', in Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, Harper and Row, New York,1953,p.1

2. Ibid.,p.1

The problem underlying negative existential is thus intimately connected with the problem of reference. The idea behind the principal problem about reference is that whenever we talk, we talk about something that exists. Every true statement is said to be about existent, otherwise the statement would not refer to it. It is not possible to refer to nothing; hence it is not possible to say anything true or false about what does not exist. In this context I will discuss the view of Meinong and early Russell shortly.

Meinong's view:

Meinong talked about unreal objects. Negative existential like 'The round square does not exist', 'Pegasus does not exist', Meinong argues, are about round square and Pegasus. But for Meinong the problem does not turn upon the question of meaning as Russell it took to be. He seems to have considered such sentences like 'the round square does not exist' as of the subject predicate form. Accordingly he insists that such sentences are about some object, though unreal, since he is guided by the principle 'if a sentence has a certain object as its grammatical subject, then it is a sentence about that object'.

Accordingly Meinong would ask 'what is it that the sentence 'the round square does not exist' is about?' The obvious answer would be Round Square. But how can we say that the sentence is about round square when there is no such object? The assumption on which the problem is based is put by him thus: "If I say 'Blue does not exist' I am thinking just of blue. It is as if the blue must have being in the first place, before we raise the question of its being (Sein) or non-being (Nichtsein)."³

Hence it is argued by him that all mental acts are directed upon objects but the objects of cognitive acts (like, knowing, believing, supposing, judging) are of a special kind called 'objectives'. We should, then, admit besides objects, (i.e., objects in the strict sense) a special kind of objects called 'objectives' like being or non-being of the round square. The important point that he seeks to maintain is that the objectives cannot be said to be existent in the sense in which objects are. Such entities which have subsistence are not to be treated as real in any sense. The object round square, it is to be noted, is a constituent of the objective non-existence of the round square and as such the object is arrived at by means of the objective. Since objects are presented to us directly by ideas and negation is never a matter for mere idea we are to consider negation as a characteristic not of objects but of objectives.

For Meinong, it is to be noted, while objectives admit of the positive-negative antithesis, objects do not, objective may be either objective of being or objective of non-being. What Meinong would intend to suggest is that the truth of a judgment is determined by the objective to which it refers. What would make the judgment 'the round square does not exist' true is the objective non-being or non-existence of the round square. Since the judgment is true we are to say that the objective of the judgment subsists. The objective 'the round square does not exist' subsists but the objective 'the round square exists' cannot be said to subsist. If the objectives subsist they would be factual or facts and they would be unfactual if they do not subsist. What would follow from Meinong's contention is that the objectum cannot be primary object of judgment. He argues, "The objective is the primary object of judgment or assumption, and the objectum is only indirectly given as that about which something is thought."⁴

From the above discussion it would be clear that the analysis of such negative existential as 'the round square does not exist' has let Meinong to admit object like round square. But object like round square according to Meinong, would neither exist nor subsist; it is said to lie beyond being and non-being and hence it is unreal. According to him in such assertions like 'the round square does not exist' we do refer, in a sense, to an object viz., round square.

So, the actual view of Meinong philosopher is there is no singular term without referring an object. If the object is non-existing entity then that singular term refers the sense or idea of that object

Early Russell's view:

Russell talked about subsistent entity. In 'On Denoting' Russell hints at the puzzle underlying negative existential. He would formulate the problem thus: "Consider the proposition 'A differs from B'. If this is true, there is the difference between A and B, which fact may be expressed in the form 'the difference between A and B subsists'. But if it is false that A differs from B then there is no difference between A and B, which fact may be expressed in the form 'the difference between A and B does not subsist'. But how can a non-entity be the subject of a proposition?"⁵

Russell asks the question: 'how an assertion about what does not exist can be both true and significant?'. This is a question of the meaningfulness of the sentence. For him, a sentence to be meaningful there must be something about which it says something. The sentence 'The round square does not exist' to be meaningful if the non-existing round square must somehow be, otherwise we could not significantly deny its existence. Russell says, 'What does not exist must be something, or it would be meaningless to deny its existence; and hence we

3. A. Meinong, 'The Theory of Object', in *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, ed. By R.Chisholm,p.76

4. J. N. Findlay, *Meinong's Theory of Objects and Values*, 2nd ed. Oxford, Clarendon Press,1963,p.68

5. B. Russell, 'On Denoting', in *Logic and Knowledge*, p.48

need the concept of being, as that which belongs even to the non-existent.⁶ Russell is thus found to posit a sphere of being in addition to that of existing since this would make significant denial of something possible.

It is quite clear that early Russell would adhere to the view that negative existential like 'Pegasus does not exist' is about Pegasus. That is to say, there is a sense in which there is something for the proposition to be about, viz., Pegasus. Pegasus has, therefore, some kind of being in spite of the fact it does not exist.

II. View of Wyman philosophers:

Quine says in his essay 'On What There Is', "The notion that Pegasus must be, because it would otherwise be non-sense to say even that Pegasus is not, has been seen to lead McX into elementary confusion. Subtler minds, taking the same percept as their starting point, come out with theories of Pegasus which are less potently misguided than McX's and correspondingly more difficult to eradicate. One of these subtler minds is named, let us say, Wyman."⁷ Some philosophers talk about unactualized possible entity. According to Quine those kinds of philosophers are called Wyman.

Unactualized possible object is connected to the notion of possible world. Here I will discuss shortly Kripke's and Devid Lewis's view on possible world. The consideration of possible world in modal logic is to maintain the meaningfulness of the modal operators.

In philosophy and logic, the concept of a possible world is used to express modal claims. The concept of possible worlds is common in contemporary philosophical discourse but has been disputed. Those theorists who use the concept of possible worlds consider the actual world to be one of the many possible worlds. For each distinct way the world could have been, there is said to be a distinct possible world; the actual world is the one where we live in. Among such theorists there is disagreement about the nature of possible worlds; their precise ontological status is disputed, and especially the difference, if any, in ontological status between the actual world and all the other possible worlds. There is a close relation between propositions and possible worlds. Every proposition is either true or false at any given possible world; then the modal status of a proposition is understood in terms of the worlds in which it is true and worlds in which it is false.

A statement for modal logic was first introduced in the late 1950 work of Saul Kripke. A statement in modal logic that is possible is said to be true in at least one possible world; a statement that is necessary is said to be true in all possible worlds.

Kripke's semantics have drawn a renewed interest in modal logic and many developments in their study. But Quine, who asks to what one is referring when discussing possible worlds, and whether or not such semantics commit one to affirming their existence.

Wittgenstein is not modal logician but he also talks about possible world though he does not consider possible objects as Kripke. In 'Tractatus' Wittgenstein talks about the world, where he says that, the sum total of reality is the world and reality is the existing and non existing state of affairs. A state of affairs, we know, is composed entirely of objects. Nonexistent as well as existent state of affairs must be combinations, arrangements or configurations of existent objects: an existent state of affairs is an actual arrangement of existent objects; a nonexistent state of affairs is a non actual arrangement of existent objects. A nonexistent state of affairs is neither an actual nor a nonfactual arrangement of nonexistent objects. It is obvious that there cannot be an actual arrangement of nonexistent objects, but it might be thought that, once nonexistent states of affairs are allowed, it is possible that some of them might be non actual arrangements of nonexistent objects. But that this cannot be the case follows at once from the doctrine that the meaning of a name is the object it denotes. On this doctrine, no mention can possibly be made of nonexistent objects, for any proposition which tried to do so would be nonsensical.

Quine says those philosophers who believe in possible world also believe in unactualized possible object. The consideration of unactualized possible object means to admit non-existing entity. Unactualized possible entity means, according to Wittgenstein, non existing combination of existing objects. But Quine says, if we admit non-existing entity then it must admit in existing world. If it is then we may say, there is non-actual object or $(\exists x) \sim (\exists y) (x = y)$, which is make a contradiction.

So, Quine says, to define non-referential singular term as meaningful Wyman philosophers admitted unactualized possible entity or non-existing entity in the world. But David Lewis tries to criticize Quine's argument. Lewis believes in possible world, that's why his theory is called modal realism. David Lewis's modal realism concerning possible worlds is a defense of the view that possible worlds and their contents are equally real; he takes these worlds to be primitives and insists that his realistic interpretation of possibilities is merely a formalization of our common sense thinking about modality. As Lewis says, "I believe that there are possible worlds other than the one we happen to inhabit. If an argument is wanted, it is this. It is uncontroversial true that things might be otherwise than they are. I believe, and so

6. B. Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*, 2nd ed., p.42

7. W.V.O. Quine, 'On What There Is', in Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, Harper and Row, New York, 1953, p.2

do you, that things could have been different in countless way. (...) I therefore believe in the existence of entities that might be called ways things could have been. I prefer to call them possible worlds”⁸

As a direct consequence of his extreme realism is his well known doctrine of the *indexical theory of actuality*. “Our actual world is only one would among others. We call it alone actual not because it differs in kind from all the rest but because it is the world we inhabit. The inhabitants of other worlds may truly call their own world actual, if they mean by actual what we do (...) Actual is indexical like ‘I’ or ‘here’ or ‘now’: it depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance, to wit the world where the utterance is located”⁹

Actually Lewis explains the notion of actual world by the notion of present time. In this world, according to Lewis, what is present is actual. But past, future, all are objects of possible world, which exist in the existing world. But this argument of Lewis is very weak for Quine.

III. Quine’s arguments:

Many problems that are concerned with philosophy, the ontological problem is associated with that part of metaphysical problem under which the question, ‘what there is?’ As regards this question both in Indian and western tradition in ancient and medieval time philosophers busied with the explication of ontological problem. Those day philosophers had tended to embark on this problem on the basis of speculative metaphysics and religious concepts. Although twentieth century philosophers have revived their ancestor’s idea about the ontological problem in the terms of logical analysis and modern logic, but no philosopher seems to have been able to provide satisfactory solution to this problem. It is W.V.O. Quine who has tried to solve this problem in a new fashion.

Quine’s approach to ontological problem is observed with his ‘notion of quantification and of identity’¹⁰. According to Quine’s notion of quantification, *to be is to be the value of variables* and his notion of identity provides that *there is no entity without identity*. In the essay ‘On What There Is’, Quine argues against both types of ontological theories namely, the ontological theory which admits subsistent entities and the ontological theory which admits possible object. The arguments of Quine against these two theories are as follows:

Quine points out both theories are guided by the view that the meaning of a term is reference and a general term is its extension. Carnap says in his essay ‘Meaning and Necessity’, there are two types of expression in language, singular term and general term or we can say intentional term and extensional term. Extension of a term is the particular individual itself which refers by the term. For example: the term ‘Ram’ is the extension of Ram, ‘Man’ is the extension of class of man. On the other hand, intension of a term is the concept which is related to the particular individual. For example: intension of the term ‘Ram’ is the concept which is related to the Ram, the intension of the term ‘Man’ is the property which is related to the class of man.

Quine says the main problem contained in the view that claims the corresponding to the use of every singular term (e.g., a proper name) as giving that term its meaning, there is an entity having some type of being, though not necessarily one of actual space-time existence. In above section we discuss that Quine invents the names ‘McX and Wyman’ to represent the class of those philosophers who would uphold such a position. “Take the case Pegasus. If Pegasus were not, McX argues, we should not talking about anything when we use the word; therefore it would be nonsense to say even that Pegasus is not. Thinking to show thus that the denial of Pegasus cannot be coherently maintained, he concludes that Pegasus is.”¹¹ Wyman philosopher would say that “Pegasus has being as an unactualized possible. When we say of Pegasus that there is no such thing, we are saying, more precisely, that Pegasus does not have the special attribute of actuality.”¹²

Quine criticizes this kind of ontological view from several grounds. Quine is a rigid empiricist so it is very natural for him to deny any kind of non-existing or subsistent or fictional objects.

Argument 1

Quine says that McX does not claim that ‘Pegasus’ (etc.) is a physical, spatio-temporal entity, but rather an idea. In negative existential statement when we say ‘Pegasus does not exist’ the sentence will be meaningless. This singular term ‘Pegasus’ does not refer anything which is spatio-temporally exists. To maintain the meaningfulness of this kinds of sentence McX philosophers talk about those kinds of fictional object which exist in our idea. But, according to Quine, the claim ‘Pegasus does not exist’ is not claiming that the Pegasus idea does not exist. As Quine argues: “we may for the sake of an argument concede that there is an entity, and even a unique entity (though this is rather implausible), which is the mental Pegasus-idea; but this mental entity is not what people are talking about when they deny Pegasus.”¹³

8. D. Lewis. ‘Possible Worlds’, in Loux, 1979, p.182

9. Ibid., p.184

10. W.V.O. Quine: ‘Notes on Existence and Necessity’, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1943, p.40

11. W.V.O. Quine, ‘On What There Is’, in Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, Harper and Row, New York, 1953, p.2

12. Ibid., p.3

13. Ibid., p.2

Argument 2

Wyman suggest instead that ‘Pegasus’ here refers to an ‘unactualized possible’. Quine says, Wyman has thus defined ‘exist’ to include also non-actual, non-spatio-temporal entities. Quine says, “However, Wyman, in an ill-conceived effort to appear agreeable, genially grants us the nonexistence of Pegasus and then, contrary to what we meant by nonexistence of Pegasus, insist that Pegasus is. Existence is one thing, he says, and subsistence is another. The only way I know of coping with this obfuscation of issues is to give Wyman the word ‘exist’.”¹⁴ But if we accept such a definition of ‘existence’ to include ‘subsistence’ means of actual and possible- we would thereby accept a very messy ontology. Quine says, “Take, for instance, the possible fat man in that doorway; and, again, the possible bald man in that doorway. Are they the same possible man or two possible men? How do we decide? How many possible men are there in that doorway? Are there more possible thin ones than fat ones? How many of them are alike? Or would their being alike make them one? Are no possible things alike? Is this the same as saying that it is impossible for two things to be alike? Or, finally, is the concept of identity simply inapplicable to unactualized possible?”¹⁵ Quine asks how could we differentiate, identify, count and generally classify such possible. So, Quine suggests we should reject the notion of such a sentence’s subject (e.g., Pegasus) as Wyman’s possible introduce more problems than they solve.

Quine also says that we should limit our use of adverb ‘possible’ to statements rather than entities. Another reason for rejecting Wyman’s possible and Mix’s ideas are by considering an antithesis or contradictory as subject of a negative existential proposition. Quine gives an example “..... Slight change in the example and speak not of Pegasus but of the round square cupola on Berkeley College.”¹⁶ The term ‘the round square cupola on Berkeley College’ cannot be an unactualized possible object. So would Wyman admit an ‘unactualized impossible’? Wyman says that no, these are meaningless. Quine says that meaningfulness of contradictions in mathematical logic due to Alonzo Church.

Argument 3

Quine’s approach to ontological problem is observed with his ‘notion of quantification and of identity’¹⁷. According to Quine’s notion of quantification, *to be is to be the value of variables* and his notion of identity provides that *there is no entity without identity*. Quine puts his criterion of ontological commitment on the line of Plato’s doctrine of ontology. When Plato talked about ontology, he admitted of existence of non-being as well as of being. Plato expressed his views on the existence of non-being like this: non-being must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not?

Apparently, since we consider, according to Plato, something as ‘non-being’, so ‘non-being’ must necessarily be. Historically, Plato’s doctrine of ontology what Quine calls ‘Plato beard’¹⁸, has proved though.

Like Plato, through formulating criterion of ontological commitment Quine tries to expose that we affirm that something exists in some sense or other. Quine means to say that when we do make assertion that something exists in some sense or other, it leads us to ontological commitment.

In his essay ‘On What There Is’ Quine maintains, like Russell, that the incomplete symbols in language must be passed away and instead we should have pure referential expressions which would admit suitable ontological entities. This leads him to suggest that the expressions such as ‘the present king of France’, ‘the round square’ etc. do not refer to any possible or impossible Meinongian objects. The so-called possible subsistent entities are ‘Plato’s beard’ which must be laid to rest if the ontology we accept has to be logically pure. Quine with one logical stroke rules out such odd-looking entities like the Pegasus which have always troubled philosophers and logicians alike. The quantification logic is a great boon for the philosopher because it can now tell them what is that which exists in the world at least from the point of view of the logic and language one accepts. Quine says:

“Our acceptance of 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. Our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the overall conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadest sense... To whatever extent the adoption of any system of scientific theory may be said to be a matter of language, the same but no more may be said of the adoption of ontology.”¹⁹

14. Ibid.,p.3

15. Ibid.,p.4

16. Ibid.,p.5

17.W.V.O.Quine: ‘Notes on Existence and Necessity’, *The Journal of Philosophy*,1943,p.40

18. W.V.O. Quine, ‘On What There Is’, in Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, Harper and Row, New York,1953,p.2

19. Ibid.,pp. 16-17

Quine says we should untangle Plato's Beard with Bertrand Russell's *theory of descriptions*. Transform a platonic bearded statement into one beginning with a bound variable/ quantificational word, like, 'something', 'nothing', 'everything'. Thus the old subject (e.g., 'Pegasus') of platonic bearded statements is removed. The new subject of the Russell's theory of description becomes a bound variable, which is meaningful but purposefully ambiguous, and thus not thought to refer to an idea or possible. For example: 'the author of Waverley is a poet' is explained as a whole as meaning, 'something wrote Waverley, and nothing else wrote Waverley, and that something is a poet'. Hence we do not entertain the idea or possible, of 'the author' but rather a 'something' which as such is undetermined and so hard to suggest to be a idea or possible.

The application of Russell's theory of description to non-existent terms, e.g., 'Pegasus', is – 'Pegasus is not' → 'Nothing is a winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon'.

Russell's theory of description rephrase avoids the ontological problem issued from Plato's Beard. Via a descriptive statement with, bound variable we are not tempted to posit a non actual existent. If the transformation of the non being into a descriptive phrase is not possible for whatever reason, Quine claims we can still transform that subject from a noun into an adjective or into verb e.g., 'the thing that Pegasizes'. As Quine says in his essay ".....the singular noun in question can always be expanded into a singular description, trivially or otherwise, and then analyzed out à la Russell."²⁰

Argument 4

Another way to resolve Plato's Beard, bypassing McX and Wyman's errors, without recourse to Russell, would be to see the distinction between meaning and naming. Quine makes it clear that in his own use of 'meaning' in this context he would fall back on Frege's distinction between sense and reference. A term may have sense without necessarily having a reference, i.e., without there being some entity which it means or to which it refers. The meaning of 'morning star' and 'evening star' are distinct. But the named object Venus is distinct again to both meanings because it is an object, not a meaning. Likewise, the meaning of 'Pegasus' is distinct from a purported named object. Therefore one should not believe that because a word Pegasus has a meaning so it must therefore refer to an actual object. Naming implies the existence of the named. But meaning of a term does not necessarily imply existence of the term. A term can be understood without the implication of the existence of that to which it ostensibly refers.

Quine asks that, are there such entities as 'attributes, relations, classes, numbers, functions'? McX believes in the existence of universal, such as 'redness'. But McX cannot assume that 'red' names an object, because of the mentioned distinction between meaning and naming, i.e., that a word has a meaning does not imply that it must name an object. Now, let us assume McX grants us, Quine writes, the distinction between meaning and naming. Still, McX says that these meaning are still universals. Quine responds to this by saying that, the only way I know how to counter it is by refusing to admit meanings. Quine still retains the use of the word 'meaningful' but Quine does not reify it into an existent abstract entity as McX does as a universal.

Quine sees the word 'meaningful' through logical behaviorist eyes. He seeks to reduce the word 'meaningful' to what people do, how they behave in the presence of the word. 'Meanings' can be divided into significant or insignificant, synonymous and heteronymous. But Quine says to consider 'meanings' as universals or as naming entities is surely illusory.

So, Quine criticizes this kinds of ontological commitments by several grounds. In this term paper I discuss above few arguments, which is basically based on the principle 'No entity without identity'.

IV. Concluding remarks:

In criticism of the paper one might apply the ontological commitment criteria which Quine puts forward to normal utterance relating to the entities which Quine dismisses. It would seem to be uncontentious in ordinary language to assert, for example, that there are seven colors in the spectrum, or that a possibility of something or other exists. The most obvious way to interpret these statements is such that they constitute an example of ontological commitment by Quine's criterion, and though it may be possible to re-interpret such utterances in such a way as to avoid the ontological commitment, Quine gives us no good reason why we should. The nearest he comes when he puts up various odd questions about 'possible men' to show that their existence raises problems. It is however, not necessarily a great problem that not all questions can significantly be asked of a given entity, and there seems little reason to suppose that a question which can reasonably be asked of a material entity must also make sense when asked of an abstract entity.

20. Ibid.,p.8

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