[7.4.1.3.] “No Entity Without Identity.”

The last two sentences of the previously quoted passage (“These elements are well-nigh incorrigible [not susceptible to correction or improvement]. … I feel we’d do better simply to clear Wyman’s slum and be done with it”) foreshadow a famous doctrine of Quine’s that appears more explicitly in his later writings:

“No entity without identity.”¹ We should allow a type of thing into our ontology only if we can give identity conditions for it.

Identity conditions (df.): criteria that must be met in order for $x$ and $y$ to be numerically identical; e.g., the identity conditions for physical objects are as follows: physical object $x$ and physical object $y$ are identical iff $x$ and $y$ occupy the same position in space-time.

This ontological standard is very strict. It is difficult to provide identity conditions for properties, propositions, ideas (and other mental entities)... even persons. If we cannot provide identity conditions for persons (i.e., if it turns out that we cannot say what conditions must be met in order for person $x$ to be numerically identical to person $y$), then, on Quine’s standards, there are no such things as persons.

The point that Quine is making in “On What There Is” is this: if we cannot specify identity conditions for unactualized possibles (i.e., if we cannot say what conditions must be met in order for unactualized possible $x$ to be one and the same as unactualized possible $y$), then we should not admit unactualized possibles into our ontology.

Quine’s view is that there are no identity conditions for merely possible (possible but not actual) entities, i.e., there is no way to tell when unactualized possible $x$ is one and the same thing as unactualized possible $y$. So we should exclude unactualized possibles from our ontology.

[7.4.1.5.] Quine’s Answer to the Problem of Non-Being: Russellian Translations.

Having rejected McX’s and Wyman’s answers, Quine now gives his own: sentences containing non-referring definite descriptions should be translated according to Russell’s theory of descriptions. For example (145):

Definite descriptions that do not refer...

“The round square cupola is pink” = “There is an $x$ such that $x$ is round and square and a cupola, and for all $y$, if $y$ is round and square and a cupola, then $y = x$, and $x$ is pink.” (Quine says: “Something is round and is square and is a cupola and is pink, and nothing else is round and is square and is a cupola.”) This is false.

• The troublesome non-referring expression, “the round square cupola” has disappeared!
• Quine maintains that this approach will work for any non-referring definite description:


² A cupola (pronounced “kyoo’-puh-luh”) is a domed roof or ceiling.
Where descriptions are concerned, there is no longer any difficulty in affirming or denying being. … So the old notion that statements of nonbeing defeat themselves goes by the board. When a statement of being or nonbeing is analyzed by Russell’s theory of descriptions, it ceases to contain any expression which even purports to name the alleged entity whose being is in question, so that the meaningfulness of the statement no longer can be thought to presuppose that there be such an entity. (146)

But what about…

Names that do not refer?

- “Pegasus” is a name, not a definite description like “the round square.” So Russell’s theory of descriptions does not apply to it directly.

Quine says we have two options when translating a sentence containing a non-referring name like “Pegasus,” e.g., “Pegasus does not exist”:

i) Replace it with a definite description, e.g., “the winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon”; then we can apply Russellian translation to “The winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon does not exist” to get:

“There is nothing that is a winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon.” (“It is not the case that there is an \( x \) such that \( x \) is a winged horse and, for all \( y \), if \( y \) is a winged horse then \( y = x \), and \( x \) was captured by Bellerophon”).

ii) Replace it with a verb phrase. Suppose that the idea of Pegasus is either too complex or too basic to unpack with a definite description. Even then, it remains true that anything has a property that nothing else has—the property of being itself—so we can use that property to create a verb phrase such as “the thing that pegasizes.” We can then apply Russellian translation to “The thing that pegasizes does not exist,” to yield something like:

“There is nothing that pegasizes.” (“It is not the case that there is an \( x \) such that \( x \) pegasizes.”)

Quine summarizes as follows:

If in terms of pegasizing we can interpret the noun ‘Pegasus’ as a description subject to Russell’s theory of descriptions, then we have disposed of the old notion that Pegasus cannot be said not to be without presupposing that in some sense Pegasus is.

Our argument is now quite general. McX and Wyman supposed that we could not meaningfully affirm a statement of the form ‘So-and-so-is not’, with a simple or descriptive singular noun in place of ‘so-and-so,’ unless so-and-so is. This supposition is now seen to be quite generally groundless, since the singular noun in question can always be expanded into a singular description, trivially or otherwise, and then analyzed out à la Russell.

… 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. (146, emphases added)3

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3 We know from “Two Dogmas” that Quine seems not think that single words or expressions, taken in isolation, have meaning, or even that individual sentences or statements, all on their own, have meaning. His view is that “[t]he unit of empirical significance is the whole of science”—i.e., the whole of our empirical knowledge of the world. (528)
Finally, Quine offers the following diagnosis of how McX and Wyman go wrong:

- They confuse naming with meaning – assuming that the thing that a word names must be one and the same thing as its meaning.
- They then go on to mistakenly assume that if a word fails to name something, then it must be meaningless.
- Because of this confusion, McX assumes that, in order for “Pegasus” to be meaningful, it must name something... and he settles on something that actually is (viz., the idea of Pegasus) as the thing that “Pegasus” names.
- And Wyman, assuming the same thing (that for “Pegasus” to be meaningful it must name something), settles on an unactualized possible as the thing that “Pegasus” names.

This is a mistake that Frege did not make: he held that two terms (e.g., “the Morning Star” and “the Evening Star”) can name the same object (e.g., Venus) without having the same meaning—so he did not confuse naming with meaning.

But in pointing this out, Quine is not agreeing with Frege about what the meaning of a given term is—he is simply agreeing that naming and meaning are different things.

[7.4.2.] The Problem of Universals.

After his discussion of the Platonic riddle of non-being, Quine turns to another traditional metaphysical problem, one to which he will eventually connect his view that words can have meaning even if there is nothing that they name: the problem of universals.

This is a problem about attribute agreement: how do we explain the fact that two or more separate, individual things can have something in common?

Consider two objects, e.g., two apples, that have some of their attributes in common. They are both green, round, sweet... and they are both apples.

According to the pre-philosophical, common-sense view…

- we don’t create all these similarities by classifying things together; we don’t arbitrarily classify various objects as red, round, etc. and thereby make them similar in the relevant ways;
- rather, we classify them as we do because they are green, round, etc., independently of our classifying them as such; at least some of the similarities among objects are objective, real, independent of our classifying activity.

Assuming that this is true, how do we explain how it is that two or more different things can have something in common? Beginning with Plato, some philosophers have found it philosophically puzzling how two distinct objects, existing separately from one another, could have attributes in common.

Two competing philosophical views of the matter are realism and nominalism.

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4 A helpful introduction to the debate over attribute agreement is the first chapter of Michael Loux, *Metaphysics* (Routledge, 1998), on which I rely in this section of notes.
[7.4.2.1.] Realism.

One answer to the problem of universals is:

realism (df.): there are universals, entities that have being independently of particular things (a.k.a. particulars) and to which all particulars of a given kind relate.

- Examples: all particular green things stand in a relationship to the universal greenness; all apples stand in a relationship to the universal apple; all samples of silver stand in a relationship to the universal silver.
- Universals are separate from and independent of the particulars to which they relate.
- While each particular can be at only one position in space at any one time, a universal can be wholly exhibited or exemplified by many different (spatially separate) particulars. It is not that each of a billion apples has 1/1,000,000,000th of the universal apple in it; rather, the entire universal is exhibited or exemplified in any given particular apple.
- So according to this type of realism, one’s ontology should include something over and above particulars: it should include universals.

*Important caveat:* the word “realism” is used to refer to several different theories, not all of which have anything to do with universals.

Quine uses McX to illustrate realism:

Speaking of attributes, he [McX] says: “There are red houses, red roses, red sunsets; this much is prephilosophical common sense in which we must all agree. These houses, roses, and sunsets, then, have something in common; and this which they have in common is all I mean by the attribute of redness.” (147)

[7.4.2.3.] Arguments for Realism.

Quine now considers what sort of argument McX might give to defend his view:

There must be universals, because otherwise expressions like “is red” (“is sweet,” “is an apple,” etc.) would be meaningless. I.e., we must posit that there are universals in order to explain the meaningfulness of such terms.

Quine has already argued that this sort of reasoning is unsound, since terms can be meaningful even if there are no objects that they name; naming is one kind of meaning, but it is not the only kind.

He then considers a slightly different defense of realism:

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5 Quine describes McX’s realism as being “basic” to his conceptual scheme: (df.): one’s conceptual scheme is the way in which he or she orders, or structures, or otherwise organizes, the content of his or her experiences and thereby renders those experiences intelligible. On Quine’s view, a person’s ontology is a fundamental part of his or her conceptual scheme: “One’s ontology is basic to the conceptual scheme by which he interprets all experiences, even the most commonplace ones. Judged within some particular conceptual scheme—and how else is judgment possible?—an ontological statement goes without saying, standing in need of no separate justification at all.” (147) Donald Davidson (1917-2003) called the view that there is a distinction between conceptual scheme and empirical content scheme-content dualism and famously argued that scheme-content dualism is a third dogma of empiricism. Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (1974).
...you admit they [i.e., expressions like “is red,” etc.] have meanings. But these meanings, whether they are named or not, are still universals, and I venture to say that some of them might even be the very things that I call attributes, or something to much the same purpose in the end. (147-148)

Here we see another connection between the question whether realism is true and Quine’s solution to the Platonic Riddle of Non-Being:

- **One of the solutions that Quine offered to that Riddle involved replacing a non-referring name with a verb phrase, e.g., replacing “Pegasus” with “thing that pegasizes,” or “thing that has the property of pegasizing,” or “pegasizer.”**
- **This use of this sort of phrase threatens to commit Quine to realism about universals:** just like “green” is thought to be meaningful only if greenness is, and “sweet” is thought to be meaningful only if sweetness is, “pegasizer” is thought to be meaningful only if pegasusiness is.

But Quine denies that a general term (“green,” “sweet,” “pegasizer,” etc.) can be meaningful only if there is some entity that is *its meaning*:

...the only way I know to counter [this defense of realism] is by refusing to admit meanings. However, I feel no reluctance toward refusing to admit meanings, for I do not thereby deny that words and statements are meaningful. (148)

In other words, **the fact that a piece of language is meaningful does not imply that it “has” or corresponds to a thing or entity that is its meaning.** We can acknowledge the meaningfulness of language without allowing things called meanings into our ontology.

We already saw Quine take this view toward the beginning of “Two Dogmas”:

For the theory of meaning the most conspicuous question is as to the nature of its objects: **what sort of things are meanings?** They are evidently intended to be ideas, somehow—mental ideas for some semanticists, Platonic ideas for others [e.g., Frege]. Objects of either sort are so elusive, not to say debatable, that there seems little hope of erecting a fruitful science about them.

A felt need for meant entities may derive from an earlier failure to appreciate that meaning and reference are distinct. Once the theory of meaning is sharply separated from the theory of reference, it is a short step to recognizing as the business of the theory of meaning simply the synonymy of linguistic forms and the analyticity of statements; **meanings themselves, as obscure intermediary entities, may well be abandoned.** (519, emphases added)

[7.4.2.4.] Nominalism.

The first option that Quine suggests (namely, that the fact that a linguistic utterance is significant “is an ultimate and irreducible matter of fact”) is similar to the view he himself takes regarding the ontological status of universals:

**nominalism** (df.): there are no universals. The only things there are, are particulars. In other words, one’s ontology should not include universals; it should include only particular things.

Quine acknowledges that individual apples, houses, etc. are red; but he denies that this requires there to be an entity, *redness*, existing independently of individual apples, houses, etc.

**So how can we explain attribute agreement?** Realism was proposed as an explanation of the seemingly mysterious fact that two individual things can share an attribute in common. If realism is not true, then how can we explain that fact?
Quine says: we can’t. Attribute agreement is an ultimate, irreducible fact.

That the houses and roses and sunsets are all of them red may be taken as ultimate and irreducible, and it may be held that McX is no better off, in point of real explanatory power, for all the occult entities which he posits under such names as ‘redness.’ (137)

Quine’s view seems to be that we do not need to explain attribute agreement at all: it is a fundamental and non-analyzable aspect of the world.6

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The article ends without Quine having declared in favor of any specific ontological scheme. In fact, he takes a very liberal attitude towards the issue of deciding among simple conceptual schemes:

Here we have two competing conceptual schemes, a phenomenalistic one and a physicalistic one. Which should prevail? Each has its advantages; each has its special simplicity in its own way. Each, I suggest, deserves to be developed. (150)

…the question of what ontology actually to adopt still stands open, and the obvious counsel is tolerance and an experimental spirit. Let us by all means see how much of the physicalistic conceptual scheme can be reduced to a phenomenalistic one; still, physics also naturally demands pursuing, irreducible in toto though it be. (151, emphasis added)

Stopping point for Wednesday November 19. No new reading for next time (the Monday after Thanksgiving). I will give a “bird’s eye view” summary of the semester and try to show how all the figures we’ve covered, from Frege to Quine, hang together. Your term paper will be due on the Wednesday after Thanksgiving.

6 This is the view that Michael Loux attributes to Quine; see Loux’s Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction, p.59 and p.88 n.8.