-What is there?

-Everything.

But this is, of course, quite tautological and tells us nothing of the constituents of the aforementioned totality.

The rather amusingly named fictional philosopher McX receives much scorn from W.V.O. Quine; for, when he and Quine have a fictional debate on the existence of the winged horse Pegasus, McX argues that Pegasus must exist, for otherwise, saying "Pegasus does not exist," which is what Prof. Quine states in this fictional debate, would be nonsense; the entity 'Pegasus' would *have* to exist; otherwise we could not even speak of it, for there would be nothing to speak of.

(Quine calls this pothole-filled and overused route of argument "Plato's Beard" and cleverly comments offhand that it has dulled Occam's Razor over the years.)

But the word Pegasus has spatiotemporal connotations, and McX concedes that no winged horse exists in any region of space-time. When pressed, he blurts that Pegasus is but an idea in the mind of man, which is not even what Quine was denying the existence of in the first place. Quine was denying the existence of the spatiotemporal entity Pegasus.

It seems that McX has hastily confused Pegasus with Pegasus-idea. Interestingly, he would never confuse the Parthenon with the Parthenon-idea.

"McX would sooner be deceived by the crudest and most flagrant counterfeit than grant the nonbeing of Pegasus." Ouch.

And up jumps fictional philosopher #2, Wyman, to refine McX's argument. He maintains that "Pegasus" is an *unactualized possible,* which is to say that Pegasus "does not have the special attribute of actuality."

Saying Pegasus is not actual is similar to saying the Parthenon is red. In both cases, we presuppose that the subject *is* (and *not* the existence of the subject).

Wyman limits 'existence' to actuality despite his espousal of unactualized possibles to preserve an illusion of ontological agreement between himself and the rest of us. It would thus be true to say that Pegasus does not exist, but Wyman would insist that Pegasus *is.*

But then we would evidently have no way of differentiating between two entities which are unactualized possibles. Quine says, "Is the possible fat man in the doorway different from the possible bald man? Is he the same as the possible tall man?" Etcetra.

Can the fat man in the doorway even be distinct from the thin man in the doorway? Quine will discuss contradictory unactualized possibles soon.

Quine, Willard V. "On What There Is." *The Review of Metaphysics* 2, no. 5 (1948): 21-38. www.jstor.org/stable/20123117.

"But what sense can be found in talking of entities which cannot meaningfully be said to be identical with themselves and distinct from one another?"

A Fregean therapy of individual concepts is mentioned, but Quine feels that on the whole it would be better off to simply clear off Wyman's "slum".

At this point, Quine suggests that we limit modalities to whole statements; perhaps the motivation behind this is related to the fact that he believes the fundamental elements of a theory of linguistics should be sentences and not words.

"The cupola on Berkeley College is a round square."

Can we now drive Wyman to allow for unactualized impossibles?

No, for Wyman "chooses the other horn of the dilemma" and says that the phrase "round square cupola" is *meaningless.*

The doctrine of the meaninglessness of contradictions, says Quine, runs way back. Some of its devotees have gone so far as to challenge the method of proof by contradiction- a challenge which, Quine feels, will end in an attempt to prove by contradiction the unsoundness of a proof by contradiction.

"Moreover, the doctrine of meaninglessness of contradictions has the severe methodological drawback that it makes it impossible, in principle, ever to devise an effective test of what is meaningful and what is not."

This follows from none other than Church's theorem of the impossibility of building a general theorem-tester!

But enough on the inconveniences of Plato's Beard; it is now time to take steps against it.

Quine now turns to Bertrand Russell's theory of singular descriptions.

In accordance with Russell's analysis, "The cupola at Berkley College is round square," may be rephrased by adding the existential quantifier: "There exists an *x* such that *x* is a round square cupola at Berkley College."

Now, the negation of this statement would express the sense that there is no *x* such that x is a round square cupola at Berkley College; a round square cupola at Berkley College is not.

Plato's Beard is now completely dispelled; we make no reference at all to the entity whose nonbeing we are arguing! We merely state that there does not exist a certain "something".

Similarly, for Pegasus, we can say, "There does not exist any *x* such that *x* is Pegasus." We need not even replace "Pegasus" with a description.

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McX and Wyman's claim that we cannot deny a being without referring to it being has thus been shown to be groundless. We commit ourselves to an ontology when we say something is, but we do not commit ourselves to an ontology when we say something is not.

"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."

McX and Wyman may not have fallen into the trap if they had seen the gulf between *meaning* and *naming.* [This has been discussed at length in Putnam.] McX confused the *named object* Pegasus with the *meaning* Pegasus and thus concluded that Pegasus must be in order to have meaning; and he then, considering the fact that Pegasus does not (to the best of his knowledge) exist in the spatiotemporal sense, implicitly explains meanings as ideas in the mind, thus ending up with Pegasus as an idea in the mind.

Quine now turns to the problem of ontological commitment to universals.

There are red houses, red sunsets, red roses; McX says that they have in common the attribute of *redness.*

But, judged in another conceptual scheme, one can deny this and say that this is a popular and misleading manner of speaking. The word 'red' is true of each of the individual objects, but there is not, in addition, any entity named by the word 'redness'. *"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'."*

Now, McX cannot argue that the word 'red' has the meaning of 'redness', for we have already said previously that names do not have to be meaningful. The word 'red' can signify something without having to refer to any specific entity.

Instead, McX grants us this distinction between meaning and naming. Okay, then, he says, 'red' is not the name of any attribute.

Still, there must be *meanings,* whether they are named or not, and McX ventures to say that these meanings, unnamed by us, are the universals; these unnamed meanings are the very things he calls attributes.

Quine snidely calls this an unusually penetrating speech for McX.

He states that the only way he knows how to counter this is by *refusing to admit meanings.*

But this does not mean that he denies that words and statements are meaningful! It merely means that he denies the existence of a special attribute called "meaning." He would think of the meaning of a word in terms of its *synonymity* with another word; its significance with respect to another word (as opposed to significance with respect to the abstract entity "meaning"). This conceptual scheme is in no way

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precise; for one, no description of "synonymous" can be analytic; but *"the explanatory value of special and irreducible intermediary entities called meanings is surely illusory."*

(Assuming Quine concedes the impossibility of exact synonyms, this view of meaning is in accordance with Putnam's; even the operational definition of a word can obviously be considered a "synonym".)

We have now essentially severed the bonds of ontological commitment McX attempted to impose whenever we use a name. We have even denied ontological commitment to meanings. Is there no end to our ontological immunity?

Of course there is an end. We can have ontological commitment to universals if we assert their existence in accordance with Russell-that *there is something* (bound variable) which red houses and red sunsets have in common. Our conclusion is that we can only have ontological commitment to anything in this form, and not, like McX argued, whenever we use a name. Names are altogether immaterial to the ontological issue.

Quine goes on to speak of how the entirety of language can be limited words like pronouns such as 'something', 'everything', etc. Our ontological commitments can be entirely expressed in their manner. *"To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable."*

We may say, for example, that some dogs are white, and need not recognized doghood or whiteness, for that statement merely asserts that there are some things that are dogs that are white; and for this, we need to commit ourselves to white dogs, but not dogs or whiteness.

On the other hand, when we say that some zoological species are cross-fertile, we *must* recognize as entities the several species themselves, no matter how abstract they are.

Classical mathematics, it seems to Quine, is clearly "up to its neck" in ontological commitments. The issue is clearer now than of old, at least, because now we have a definite standard to decide when and how something is committed to an ontology:

A theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in other that the affirmations made in the theory be true.

And that is the beating heart of Quine's landmark thesis.

Because this standard of ontological presupposition was never made clear, modern philosophical mathematicians did not realize that they were debating on the same old problem of universals in different terms.

Although, *"modern points of view on foundations of mathematics do come down pretty explicitly to disagreements as to the range of entities to which the bound variables should be permitted to refer."*

But the larger problem has been made clear, at the very least; we now have a standard of ontological presupposition.

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Quine now draws parallels between the stances of philosophers on universals and the stances of mathematicians on mathematics.

Realism corresponds to *logicism,* and they hold that there exist abstract entities independent of the mind.

Conceptualism corresponds to *intuitionism,* and they hold that universals and abstract entities exist all in the mind.

Nominalism corresponds to *formalism.* They deny the very existence of abstract entities and look at mathematics as merely a play on insignificant notations which may or may not be of utility. [See: Hilbert's program.]

Now how are we to adjudicate among rival ontologies?

Quine has argued that the kind of ontology we adopt can be consequential, for it determines the entities our bound variables are capable of referring to. **(Question: How can someone who subscribes to conceptualism/intuitionism or nominalism/formalism have any ontological commitments at all if they deny the existence of independent abstract entities?)**

"To be is to be the value of a variable" is merely a rule for knowing the ontological commitments we would have if we subscribed to a certain school of thought; we cannot adjudge the above three doctrines on that basis. We will look to that rule not to know what there is, but to know what a doctrine says there is.

However, the advantages for operating on a "semantical plane" are numerous. For one, one can consistently disagree with another's ontology-although one cannot allow one's bound variables to refer to entities in another's ontology which are not in one's own.

Another advantage is that one finds common ground to argue; for differences in ontology will always boil down to a fundamental difference in conceptual schemes. Often, this fundamental difference will cause a divergence when it comes to language, and thus the basic controversy between the ontology of two people collapses to a controversy about language.

Quine says this, and yet managed to transcend the barriers of our language-transcend all possible barriers, in fact-by establishing his absolute ontological standard; he throws away the ladder (of language, of everything) that he climbs on to establish it. A bootstrapping of sorts in many ways. Amazing.

Quine essentially feels that we choose ontological schemes on criterions similar to those on which we choose our scientific theories: simplicity, coherence, etc.

Ultimately, he feels that the question of which ontology to adopt still stands open, and his counsel tolerance and experimental spirit, desiring to adventure into all ontological schemes and thereof comparing them to select the best one.

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