

The Practicality of Actuality

A defense of Quine's rejection of the existence-subsistence distinction

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Introduction

Many scholars contend that the greatest thinker in theoretical philosophy and logic in twentieth century was Willard Van Orman Quine—a philosopher who, in his seminal essay “On What There Is,” famously explicates his theory of ontological commitment. Within this paper, Quine repudiates the metaphysical tradition of distinguishing existence from subsistence. The result of Quine's rejection of this distinction was a more simplified approach to establishing what particular theories accept to exist. In eliminating the extensive challenges associated with the vast philosophical landscape concocted by the existence-subsistence distinction, Quine successfully operationalizes ontological commitments, creating a more intelligible process for philosophers to understand what a theory is committed to and making general provisions for more certain metaphysical thought.

The conception of an existence-subsistence distinction has its origins in the beliefs of Alexius Meinong. In his essay “The Theory of Objects,” Meinong declared his empirical observation that it is possible to consider not only objects that exist, but also those which don't exist. The philosopher held all objects to have a shadowy existence, which he dubbed “subsistence.” For example, though it seems impossible for a round square to exist, Meinongians believe that, in a certain sense, round squares do exist in the form of this shadowy subsistence by reason of thinkers' ability to ponder and discuss the concept of a round square.

However, some philosophers oppose this existence-subsistence distinction in arguing that Meinong's theory of objects presents significant problems relating to clarity in understanding what there is in reality. Quine most notably attacks the existence-subsistence distinction on these grounds. In this essay, I will posit that Quine's rejection of the existence-subsistence distinction offers an exceptionally practical perspective of ontology. This practicality results from the rejection's resulting simplicity in affirming what is in reality versus what isn't, and its adherence to Russell's theory of descriptions to do away with the Meinongian need for subsistent objects.¹ Additionally, I will explore an objection against the practicality of Quine's theory: that the existence-subsistence distinction might better allow for philosophical theories to adhere to an intuitive understanding of reality.

¹ i.e., non-existent objects

Simplifying quantification

Perhaps the most obvious merit to Quine's conception of ontological commitment is that, by looking at quantifiers, Quine operationalizes ontology to make it clear what a theory is committed to and what a theory is not committed to. In logic, "Quantifier expressions are marks of generality" (Uzquiano, 2022). Quine contends that when our language makes use of quantifiers, we are committing ourselves to the existence of some sort of entity when we quantify over that kind of entity. For example, if a theory says that "There exists an x such that $F(x)$," the theory must commit itself to the belief that at least one object in existence satisfies the property F . Simply put, according to Quine's conception of ontological commitment, if we want to know what a theory is committed to, we shouldn't look at predicates or names. Rather, we should exclusively look at the variables and the quantifiers. For Quine, when it comes to theories, what matters for ontology is simply the variable as paired with the quantifier.

In contrast, Meinongian ideals make it more difficult to say what a theory tells philosophers about what exists. Because Meinong believed that it is possible to quantify over both existent and subsistent objects, critics argue that Meinongians have a vast menagerie of objects, which multiplies entities. A Meinongian philosopher who is considering what there is in our reality will struggle to answer what in existence a theory commits itself to, because a theory may quantify over a large array of things. This is unlike Quine's criterion of ontological commitment, which clearly states that "To be is to be the value of a bound variable" (Quine, 1948) —what a theory accepts to exist is equivalent to the values of its bound variables. Quine's principle provides an exact answer to what a theory quantifies over.

In "On What There Is," Quine writes of imaginary debates between himself and other professors to crystallize his rejection of the existence-subsistence distinction. One such debate involving a character named "Wyman" illustrates how Meinong's existence-subsistence distinction produces a disorderly perspective on what there is. Wyman holds that "Pegasus" is a being in the form of an unactualized possible; he believes that when someone says that there is no such thing as Pegasus, they are saying that Pegasus does not have the attribute of actuality. While Wyman grants his opponent the non-existence of Pegasus, he proceeds to insist that Pegasus *is* on account of the existence-subsistence distinction. Wyman has thus defined "existence" to include non-actual and non-spatio-temporal entities (i.e., subsistent entities). However, if we were to accept our definition of "existence" to include "subsistence," we would be accepting a very messy ontology.

Correspondingly, Quine states that "Wyman's slum of possibilities is a breeding ground for disorderly elements" (Quine, 1948), referring to Meinong's "jungle" of

non-being. Meinongians present themselves as having a small range of things that actually exist and a jungle of things that don't exist. As previously stated, this vast jungle of non-being presents significant problems in clarity for understanding what precisely a theory is quantifying over. When we decline to include subsistence in our framework of reality, we abide by the principle of Occam's Razor. By accepting that (1) there is no subsistence, and (2) there merely is what there is, theories are effectively guided to construct their ontological commitments on a small, practical inventory of reality. In the following section, I will evaluate and subsequently advocate for Quine's means of achieving this practical guide, illustrating how Quine's theory of ontological commitment is proficiently well-ordered.

Quine's application of Russell's theory of descriptions: Eliminating subsistence

Let's return to Wyman's argument in which he attempts to prove the existence-subistence distinction by asserting that Pegasus must exist in the form of an unactualized possible, particularly when someone argues for the non-existence of Pegasus. Wyman's tactic of agreeing with his opponent's claim that Pegasus does not exist, but "...contrary to what we meant by non-existence of Pegasus, [insisting] that Pegasus is" (Quine, 1948), is an example of the proponent of the negative side in an ontological dispute suffering the disadvantage of not being able to admit that his opponent (i.e., Wyman) disagrees with him. This dispute results in the Platonic riddle of non-being, which postulates that non-beings must in some sense be, even if they do not have the quality of actuality. Quine nicknames this paradoxical argument "Plato's beard." Quine purports to "untangle" Plato's beard with Bertrand Russell's descriptions. In doing so, Quine will strengthen the case for his denial of Meinong's need for non-existent objects, reinforcing his conception of ontological commitment.

To untangle Plato's beard, Quine begins by solving the problem of empty names—an issue that emerges in discussions regarding the philosophy of language. The problem of empty names involves the usage of references when a name is employed to refer to an object that does not exist. An empty name is a name that lacks a referent. According to Quine, "Pegasus" is an empty name. Conversely, according to a Meinongian, "Pegasus" does have a referent that exists in the realm of non-being: because thinkers can ponder and discuss the concept of a Pegasus, even in terms of its non-existence, Pegasus can therefore be referred to meaningfully.

Quine's idea to disprove non-beings' abilities to serve as referents entails transforming a Platonic beard statement into one bound with a variable/quantificational word. In stripping referents of their power to refer to non-beings, Quine will show

that his theory of ontological commitment is effective in disproving the existence-subsistence distinction. For example, the "...unanalyzed statement 'The author of Waverly was a poet' contains a part, 'the author of Waverly'" (Quine, 1948). This part is assumed by Wyman to necessitate an objective reference so as to be meaningful. However, Russell and Quine transform this sentence into the statement "Something wrote Waverly and was a poet and nothing else wrote Waverly" (Quine, 1948). Thus, the burden of objective reference, which was initially placed upon the descriptive phrase, is shifted onto bound variables. Bound variables, such as "something" or "nothing," are not names. Therefore, when a statement of being or non-being is examined through Russell's theory of descriptions, the statement's meaningfulness cannot purport to designate a specific object.

Russell's theory also applies to Quine's purposes by eliminating singular terms to prove that they are not ontologically-committing. In proving that singular terms are eliminable, Quine isolates ontological commitment to quantifiers. A proper name, such as "Socrates," can be eliminated by paraphrasing statements of the form "Socrates is F" to a sentence such as "There is a unique thing that Socratizes and everything that Socratizes is F." These descriptions become definite, and singular terms can be traded for predicates like "Socratizes." Quine has refuted Wyman's contention that "Pegasus" cannot be said without presupposing that it exists as a subsistent object. Consequently, Quine has successfully untangled Plato's beard and has done away with the Meinongian need for subsistent objects, providing support to the practicality of his well-ordered theory: (1) that there is no subsistence, and (2) there merely is what there is.

Intentionality and common sense

Though it seems overwhelmingly clear that Quine's rejection of the existence-subsistence distinction provides a very practical perspective of ontology—particularly when contrasted with Meinong's disorderly ontology—there remain objections to his perspective which a Meinongian may present and Quine must accordingly respond to. One such objection begins with the observation that we intuitively distinguish between objects that exist and those that exist in another sense. For instance, while I can reasonably deduce that the pen that I am holding is real, I acknowledge that mythological creatures are, by their very nature, not real. In this regard, Meinongians argue that their theory pays respect to common sense.

Psychologist Franz Brentano's "...account of ontological concerns in intentionality helps us understand [the psychological component of] Meinong's theory of objects" (Ogaba, 2021). "Intentionality" is the idea that mental states are always about

an object outside of themselves: one cannot have a mental representation that isn't somehow directed toward something external to the mind. By this way of thought, it is not necessary for intentional objects, which are found in mental representations, to represent objects with the attribute of actuality. Rather, these intentional objects can be imagined, real, or abstract. Intentionality is one way of explaining the intuition we have to distinguish between our thoughts about objects in existence and objects that exist otherwise. Given this contrast, it might be argued that Meinong's existence-subsistence distinction corresponds to common sense, allowing for philosophical theories to cohere more appropriately with our intuitive sense of reality.

In light of this objection, I posit that Quine would remain firm in his assertion that the existence-subsistence distinction is not meaningful. Even if the existence-subsistence distinction is attractive for its potential consistency with common sense, it is also beneficial for a theory not to give a philosopher answers so effortlessly. If a philosopher is forced to explore more intricate explanations for her theory, she will gain new, less obvious insights. Being set up in a way that includes non-being in our ontological framework, the existence-subsistence distinction provides an extra degree of flexibility that allows for common sense to be captured. However, this flexibility is excessive in its allowance for an incomprehensible number of subsistent objects, leading to philosophical indolence. When asked what there is in reality, the Meinongian would answer "Everything." Far from yielding valuable wisdom, the existence-subsistence distinction clutters ontology in exchange for the elementary appeal of common sense. Strict loyalty to our intuitions does not yield philosophically-penetrating revelations. After all, does philosophy not seek to challenge conventional ideas? By rejecting Meinong's commonsensical answer to the problem of ontological commitment, Quine approaches the Platonic riddle of non-being with a critical eye, clearing Meinong's jungle of non-being and championing a well-rounded theory, whose precision and utility are more conducive to certain ontological thought.

Conclusion

In analyzing Quine's rejection of the existence-subsistence distinction, I have established that Quine's conception of ontological commitment offers an exceptionally practical perspective of ontology. Quine makes his criterion for ontological commitment clear: what a theory is committed to is what the values of its bound variables are. This criterion clears Meinong's jungle of non-being, adhering to the recommendation of Occam's Razor: that theories ought to be constructed on the simplest inventory of the world. Moreover, Quine does away with the existence-subsistence distinction in untangling Plato's beard via Russell's theory of descriptions; he determines

that a statement of a being's or non-being's meaningfulness cannot purport to designate a specific object. Additionally, Quine concludes that singular terms can be traded for predicates, eliminating the possibility for presuppositions of subsistence and strengthening his conception of ontological commitment. Furthermore, I have opined that any appeal of Meinong's favor for common sense does not pose a significant threat to the practicality of Quine's theory, for Quine's theory's succinct inventory of the world leads to more philosophically-penetrating revelations. Quine's theory with-stands as a practical perspective of ontology and as one of the most influential theories in metaphysical thought on account of its orderliness.

References

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