Quine – On What There Is

1. Non-Existent Individuals (Pegasus): Imagine that McX believes that some entity or other DOES exist, and that Quine believes that it does not. An advantage that McX has over Quine is supposedly that Quine cannot even REFER to the thing that he does not believe in—for, in doing so, he seems to affirm that it DOES exist. For instance:

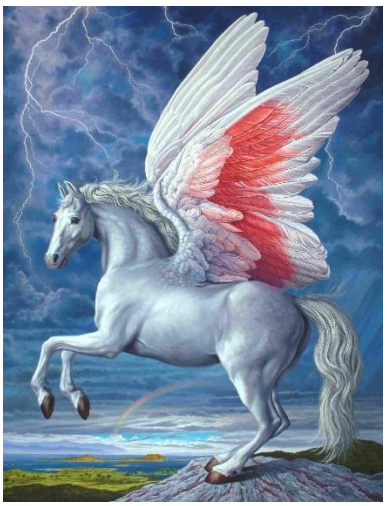
> **McX:** There is such a thing as Pegasus.
> **Quine:** No. Pegasus does not exist.
> **McX:** A-ha! But, that sentence would be meaningless unless 'Pegasus' REFERRED to something (otherwise, what in the world are you denying the existence of, if Pegasus is nothing?). But, it is NOT meaningless. So, Pegasus DOES refer to something (and we'll call that Pegasus). Therefore, Pegasus exists.

This is a classic way for McX to argue for the existence of something. (*Recall our discussion of properties: Ah, so the rose and the tomato have something in common, do they? So, there exists some THING that they share? You've admitted redness is a thing!*).

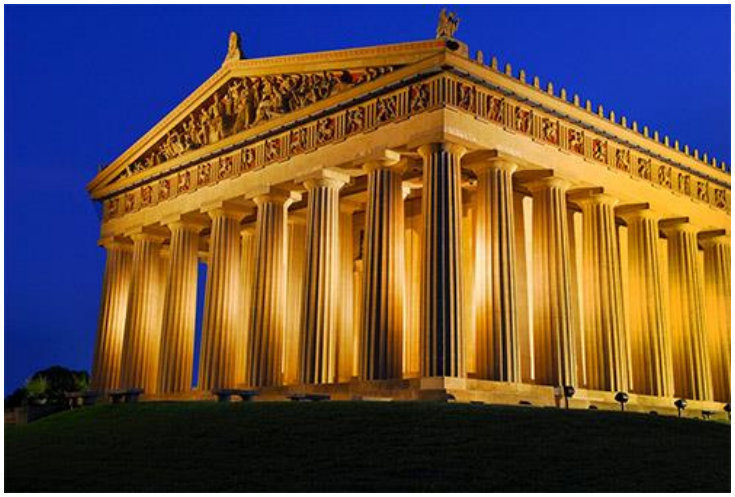
However, Quine points out that, when asked what 'Pegasus' DOES refer to, McX will surely not say that there is a physical, material, hairy, horse-like creature with wings flying around out there somewhere. Rather, she will insist that it is some abstract thing (some concept, or mental image?).

But, surely it is not some ABSTRACT thing that Quine is denying the existence of. When he says, "Pegasus does not exist", he is not denying the existence of some abstracta, but of the real, physical, winged horse!

No one makes this mistake when it comes to actual, concrete things: If someone asks, "Where is the Parthenon?" we answer "in Athens, Greece". We never get confused and say, "in the realm of abstract entities" or "in my mind"! Nor should we for Pegasus.



Pegasus



The Parthenon

Unactualized possibles: Some claim that Pegasus is an "unactualized possible" entity. To say that "There is no Pegasus" is akin to saying, "The Parthenon is not red." There IS an entity that is the Parthenon. Only it lacks the attribute of being red. Similarly, according to this proposal, there IS a Pegasus. Pegasus *exists*, and is a physical, winged horse, etc. Only, Pegasus lacks the attribute of being *actual*. Rather, Pegasus has the property of being *possible* (i.e., he COULD have been actual).

Reply: Quine's first gripe with this suggestion is that it treats 'exists' and 'is actual' (which we all thought were synonyms) as if they are two different things. What a mess!

But, more importantly, on this proposal there will be ALL SORTS of unactualized, possible beings; a whole "slum of possibles". There is no one in the doorway right now, but there COULD HAVE BEEN (i.e., it is possible). So, there IS a person in the doorway who is an unactualized, possible person. But, then Quine asks: How many possible bald men are in the doorway? How many possible fat men? Or thin men? It's absurd.

What we get is an "overpopulated universe", whereas Quine prefers "desert landscapes". For, it seems that there may in fact be an INFINITE number of beings that are not, but could have been, in the doorway. So, are there an infinite number of unactualized possibles? The universe has just become VERY populated! Furthermore, how can we tell such abstract objects apart? If they're unobservable, immaterial, and not in space or time, what characteristics do they have to differentiate them from one another?

Square Circles: The main motivation for accepting these abstract objects has been that, if we can meaningfully talk about them, then they must exist. For instance:

"The red tomato and the red rose have something in common" → redness must exist
"There is a prime number greater than 10" → numbers must exist
"There is no Pegasus" → Pegasus must exist (can't meaningfully refer to him otherwise)

But, Quine asks, what about this?

"There are no square circles" → Square circles must exist !???

Surely, square circles do not exist. For, that would be a contradiction (think about it: A square has 4 angles and 4 sides while a circle has none; so, a square circle would be both 4-sided and NOT 4-sided, both 4-angled and NOT 4-angled, and so on).

Oddly, Philosophers typically do NOT accept the existence of an abstract object that is a square circle. Rather, they instead claim that the phrase "square circle" is meaningless.

Quine points out that all of this confusion is due to a mistake that Bertrand Russell has already cleared up and solved.

Digression: The King of France is Bald

Consider this statement:

> **The present king of France is bald.**

Keep in mind that there is no present king of France. Now ask: Is this statement true or false? Either answer seems weird:

> **Can't Be True** It couldn't be true, because then that would mean that France DOES presently have a bald king (but it doesn't).
>
> **Can't Be False** But, if the statement were false, this means that its NEGATION is true. OR, in other words, it seems that "The present king of France is NOT bald" is true. (Right?) But, that statement can't be true either…

Either answer seems to entail that there is a present king of France. But there is not.

The statement appears to be **meaningful**. And all meaningful statements must be **either true or false**. However, the statement above seems as if it cannot be either!

Now, we MIGHT try to say that the statement is meaningless. Perhaps a statement is only meaningful if the subject has a '**referent**'. That is, if 'the present king of France' does not REFER to anything (because there is no such individual), then a statement is meaningless even if it is formed correctly from meaningful terms.

Note that this is how Quine's opponent responds to the statement, "There are no square circles." But, why then would this response not apply to "There is no Pegasus"? Perhaps that statement is meaningless because there is no Pegasus. And, if there are no such things as holes, then "Holes do not exist" is meaningless. And so on.

But, "The present king of France is bald" really seems to be a meaningful assertion! (as do all of the others). After all, no one, upon hearing the claim, would respond with, "I'm sorry. I don't understand what you've just said. That's meaningless."

Bertrand Russell proposed another solution. We have said that the denial of "The present king of France is bald" seems to be "The present king of France is NOT bald". Russell disagreed. While Russell agreed that the expression 'the present king of France' does not name any particular individual, even though it appears to, he disagreed that such statements are meaningless.

Russell called these sorts of expressions '**definite descriptions**', and pointed out that, though they SEEM to pick out a particular individual (e.g., 'THE present king of France'), they do not. Of course, GRAMATICALLY they appear to name individuals—e.g., the statement at hand seems to be ABOUT someone who is the present king of France—but LOGICALLY, definite descriptions do not name anything. Rather, they are claims about existence. We should really translate "The present king of France is bald" as follows:

> "There exists an x such that x is the present king of France, and x is bald."[1]

Now, if Russell is correct, then it is easy to see that **"The present king of France is bald" is FALSE**! After all, there does NOT exist an x such that x is king of France and x is bald. Problem solved. Pretty cool.

Interestingly, "The present king of France is NOT bald" is ALSO false on Russell's view. For, it translates as:

> "There exists an x such that x is the present king of France, and x is not bald."[1]

Wait a minute. If "**The king of France is bald**" is false AND "**The king of France is not bald**" is false, don't we have a contradiction? If the first statement is false, then its DENIAL is supposed to be TRUE!

Don't freak out. There is no contradiction here. According to Russell, the second statement is NOT actually a denial of the first. To deny a statement is to deny the ENTIRE statement. So, the denial of "The king of France is bald" is really as follows:

> "There does NOT exist an x such that x is the present king of France, and x is bald."[1]

Now, THIS statement IS true. So, no contradiction. Quine concludes:

> "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."

End Digression

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[1] Quine adds, "…and anything that is the present king of France is identical to x." (This is because 'THE present king…' indicates that there is no more than ONE present king of France)

Back to Pegasus: Applying this lesson to Pegasus:

'Pegasus' may seem to be a NAME rather than a description. So, when I say, "Pegasus does not exist", we might think this statement is meaningless unless the name 'Pegasus' refers to something (i.e., unless the particular individual, Pegasus, exists in some way).

But, Quine believes that 'Pegasus' is not the name of an individual. Rather, it is shorthand for a description; e.g., something like, "the winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon". So, when I say that "Pegasus does not exist", I am really saying:

> "There does NOT exist an x such that x is a winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon."[2]

This is true. Furthermore, contrary to what McX claims, anyone who utters THIS statement is NOT committing himself to the existence of something. BOOM! Solved.

2. Universals: Next, Quine tackles universals. It is commonly believed that if roses and tomatoes and cherries have something in common, then they must have some THING in common. Therefore, redness is a THING (i.e., redness exists).

Quine says that there are merely red houses, red roses, and red sunsets. End of story.

> "…but there is not, in addition, any entity whatever, individual or otherwise, which is named by the word 'redness' … That the houses and roses and sunsets are all of them red may be taken as ultimate and irreducible."

In other words, he rejects universals in favor of nominalism.

[*If you've taken Logic, you might recall that, for statements that quantify over all things—e.g., "Chad loves everything", or (∀x)Lcx—the universal quantifier only ranges over whatever the bound variable, x, could refer to; namely, the particular things in our domain. Here, Quine would agree that things like 'Chad' are our domain, but relations such as 'loves' are NOT in our domain. In logic, there are no predicates (think: universals) in our domain, only subjects. And, Quine says, he only accepts the existence of things in the domain, which our bound variables range over. As Quine puts it,*

> *"the only way we can involve ourselves in ontological commitments: by our use of bound variables." Yet, "'Some dogs are white' says that some things that are dogs are white; and, in order that this statement be true, the things over which the bound variable 'something' ranges must include some white dogs, but need not include doghood or whiteness."*]

[2] Technically: "…and anything that is a winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon is identical to x."

3. Options for Ontology: With respect to all of these supposed abstract entities, Quine says that there seem to be just three options:

1) Platonism: Abstract entities exist, independently of human beings, or minds.
2) Conceptualism: Abstract entities exist, but only as concepts in our minds.
3) Nominalism: There are no abstract entities.

But, how do we decide between them? Ultimately, Quine says that we are just doing what the scientists do. Namely, we posit some hypothesis, and then we test it. When trying to decide between two competing hypotheses, we often make this decision based on theoretical virtues. Here are two of them:

1) **Simplicity:** The better hypothesis is the simpler one.
2) **Usefulness:** The better hypothesis is the more useful one (e.g., it explains more, has greater predictive power, etc.).
3) **Coherence:** The better hypothesis coheres with (i.e., does not conflict with) other truths which we already accept or have strong reasons to believe true.

You might accuse Nominalism of being useless, because it would undermine our ability to, e.g., do math. But, Quine would deny this. For instance, a mathematician could deny that there IS a prime number greater than 10 (if by this we mean that numbers like 11, 13, 17, and so on EXIST), while nevertheless finding it USEFUL to act as if they DO exist; i.e., we can sort of pretend, and play the math game so that we can make useful models, predictions, etc. In short, numbers are clearly useful, but they'd be the same amount of useful if they were real or merely fictions. [*Though now this sounds like Conceptualism. Do these fictions or "myths" EXIST? If so, how? Are they mental entities?*]

Alternatively, you might accuse Realism as being less simple. After all, Nominalism posits sparse, 'desert landscapes' with very few entities. Yet, perhaps Platonism should be considered the simpler view because it has a very straightforward, uncomplicated answer to questions like, "Do the rose and the tomato have anything in common?"

Quine's conclusion? It's not very satisfying. He simply proposes that we should pursue all avenues, and then revise according to what we find out (though of course it is obvious that he prefers nominalism).