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 the holes debate. When Argle says that the cheese has two holes in it, Bargle exclaims that Argle must be committed to the existence of holes).

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!

It is odd that such a confusion would occur. No one confuses the CONCEPT of the Parthenon with the actual, physical Parthenon (in Athens). If someone asks, “Where is the Parthenon?” the answer is “Greece”, not “in the realm of abstract entities”. 

![Pegasus](image1)

![The Parthenon](image2)
Unactualized possibles: Some claim that Pegasus is an "unactualized possible" entity. Though Pegasus does not actually exist, it seems true that Pegasus could have existed.

But, then, there will be ALL SORTS of unactualized, possible beings. There is no one in the doorway right now, but there COULD HAVE BEEN (i.e., it is possible). So, the person in the doorway 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?

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 talk about them, then they must exist. For instance:

“There are no such things as holes” → can’t meaningfully refer to holes unless they exist
“The red tomato and the red cherry have something in common” → redness must exist
“There is a prime number greater than 10” → numbers must exist
“Pegasus could have existed” → merely possible beings exist

But, Quine asks, what about this?

“There are no such things as square circles” → Square circles 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.
Side Lesson: The King of France is Bald

Here are 3 Reasonable Assumptions:

(1) Any grammatically correct statement formed from meaningful terms has a meaning.
(2) All meaningful statements are either true or false.
(3) The denial of a true statement is false, and vice versa.

Now consider this statement:

The present king of France is bald.

This seems to be a meaningful statement. After all, unlike “The poople is moople”, the statement is grammatically correct, and we understand all of the terms. So, according to (1) - (3), it must have a truth value. So, which one is it: Is this statement true or false? (Keep in mind that there is no present king of France.) 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.

This is a big deal, though it may not seem so at first. But, recognize that, to get around this problem, we would have to reject one of the three claims above—all of which are a part of the bedrock of logic. It would be absurd to deny any of them. Consider:

(1) Surely, it would be difficult to deny that “The present king of France” has a meaning. Doesn’t this statement MEAN something?
(2) And surely, if a statement asserts something in a meaningful way, then what it asserts is either true or false, right?
(3) Finally, to deny that a statement is true is just to say that it is ‘not true’, and this is just a synonym for ‘false’, right?

Now, some philosophers have tried to reject (1). They would say that, while such statements APPEAR to be meaningful, they are not meaningful if the subject does not have 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. If you’re sympathetic to this solution, you might want to modify (1) to say:

(1) **Modified:** Any grammatically correct statement formed from meaningful terms has a meaning, **but only if all subjects/names have referents.**

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”?

Bertrand Russell didn’t like this solution. “The present king of France is bald” really seems to be a meaningful assertion! 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.”

So, he 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.

Russell agreed that the expression ‘the present king of France’ does not name any particular individual, even though it appears to. Russell called these sorts of expressions, which seem to pick out exactly one individual ‘**definite descriptions**’, and pointed out that such expressions NEVER name a particular individual, appearances to the contrary.

Of course, **grammatically** they appear to name individuals—e.g., the statement at hand seems to be ABOUT that individual 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.”

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 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)
Wait a minute. If “The king of France is bald” is false AND “The king of France is not bald” is false, isn’t claim (3) violated? If the first statement is false, then its DENIAL is supposed to be TRUE!

Don’t freak out. (3) is not violated. The second statement is not 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.”

Now, THIS statement IS true. So, claim (3) is preserved. 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.”

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 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.”

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

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 prefers to say that there are red houses, red roses, red sunsets:

2 Technically: “…and anything that is a winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon is identical to x.”
“...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.

**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) **Subjectivism:** Abstract entities exist, but they are only 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.

But, testing out a hypothesis does not commit us to the existence of the things we’re testing out. For instance, a mathematician could coherently 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), but nevertheless it could be USEFUL to act as if they do exist, so that we can play the math game and make useful predictions. (So, numbers are clearly useful, but they’d be the same amount of useful if they were real or merely fictions)

So, both realism and nominalism are useful. Furthermore, they are both simple, but for different reasons. Platonism has a very simple explanation for a tomato’s redness. But, Nominalism is simple because of its sparse ‘desert landscapes’, positing fewer entities.

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).