ON WHAT THERE IS NOT IN 'ON WHAT THERE IS'

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Abstract

I argue that the rhetorical use of the two fictional philosophers McX and Wyman makes Quine's paper 'On what there is' pragmatically inconsistent. This means that he needs to assume something is true which, according to his own theory, is actually false. I will show that, even though Quine's theory claims that all propositions concerning non-existent objects must be false, he needs to assume something true about the two fictional characters. Moreover, even though Quine's ontology theorizes the impossibility of having fictional entities which are distinct from one another, he distinguishes between McX and Wyman.

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1. The 'non-existential paradox' and Quine's solution

Very often, non-existent objects have made philosophers' knees shake. Even though it appears *prima facie* that we can talk about objects that do not exist, such as unicorns, my imaginary friend and all the gods we don't believe in, some philosophers thought that the possibility of referring to non-existent objects is inherently problematic. The reason is that "to deny the existence of something [...] we must indicate what it is the existence of which is being denied [...] but things which do not exist cannot be referred to or mentioned" (Cartwright 1960, p. 2). This metaphysical puzzle is called the 'non-existential paradox'.

As time went by, the solution proposed by Quine in his 'On what there is' (1948) became dominant. First, he expands the Russellian strategy for the elimination of descriptions as referential device treating proper names as "complex descriptive names" (Quine 1948, p. 25). He introduces artificial predicates (Berto 2013) to express, for example, the "*ex hypothesis* unanalyzable, irreducible attribute of *being Pegasus* [namely, *pegazise*]" (Quine 1948, p. 27).

Secondly, he tries to solve the non-existential puzzle endorsing two theses which are the ground of his meta-ontology. The first one states that the notion of being is captured by the quantifier according to the motto that 'to be is to be the value of a (bound) variable'. We commit to the existence of something by saying that there is an object X such that ...X... . This

well-known thesis is called 'ontological commitment'. Consistently with this idea, propositions concerning non-existent objects must be false because there is no such thing as non-existent objects. For instance, given proposition *(1)*: "Pegasus is a horse", according to the expansion of the Russellian theory to proper name, it is possible to rephrase *(1)* in *(2)*: "A unique thing *pegasizes* and is a horse". Moreover, since sentence *(2)* is a quantification construction, it is also possible to rephrase *(2)* in *(3)*: "there exists a unique X such that this X *pegazises* and is a horse". However, since such X does not exist, *(3)* is false. Finally, in order to understand what should be included in the ontological catalogue of the furniture of the world, Quine endorses a second thesis which represents a methodological device according to which 'no identity no entity' (Priest, 2005). This means that "the concept of identity is simply inapplicable to unactualized possibles [namely, to objects that do not exist]" (Quine 1948, p. 23).

This short note shows that, in his ontological manifesto (1948), Quine is pragmatically inconsistent because he needs to assume something is true which, according to his own theory, is actually false. Quine inadvertently does what his own theory prohibits. As we will see, this should not lead to dismiss Quine's position, but only the way he argues for it in his paper.

2. The truth of the falsity

'On what there is' presents three main philosophical positions: one is supported by Quine himself, and the other rival theories are supported by two philosophical caricatures named McX and Wyman. Quine's rhetoric is extraordinarily powerful in describing the two philosophers as ridiculous and indefensible (Priest, 2005). Reading Quine, it is not rare to find ourselves smiling about the ideas supported by the ultra-platonic McX and the (pseudo-)Meinongian Wyman[1].

In this context, a caricature is a fictional character that exaggerates the peculiarities or the defects of some (existent or existed) philosophers. A fictional character, belonging to the set of fictional objects, is a non-existent object which has a part in a narrative: it can be a story, a play, a movie or, as in the case of McX and Wyman, an academic paper. In these frameworks, fictional objects *live*: they eat poisoned apples, they desperately fall in love with the wrong lover and they even follow white rabbits.

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[1] Although Wyman is taken to be Meinong, he is not. First of all, Wyman thinks that all meaningful terms denote and that all denoted objects have being. However, this is not Meinong's claim (Priest 2005, p. 108). Secondly, Wyman thinks that inconsistent characterizations, such as 'round square', are meaningless, thus they single out no object, existent of otherwise. Also in this case, this is not endorsed by Meinong (1904, p. 86).

As Sherlock Holmes retires to Sussex to be an apiarist and Pegasus flies away with Bellerophon, more modestly, McX rarely has "penetrating speech[es]" (Quine 1948, p. 30) and Wyman conspires "with other philosophers in ruining the good old word 'exist'" (Quine 1948, p. 23). Certainly, as Priest suggests (2005, p. 116), a fiction may refer to something that exists or something that does not exist at all. In this second case, the fictional objects are called *pure* (Priest, 2005, p. 116). According to this distinction, McX and Wyman look not only fictional but also *purely* fictional.

However, if this is true, Quine finds himself in a preliminary difficulty. The Quinean strategy previously described needs to be applied necessarily and consistently, not only occasionally. This is why it should be possible to apply the same technique to all propositions about McX and Wyman, contained in 'On what there is'.

Consider the proposition where Quine states that Wyman's mind is "subtler" than McX's. Call this proposition *(1*)*: "One of those subtler minds [which supports less patently mistaken theory than McX] is […] Wyman" (Quine 1948, p. 22). Here Quine means that Wyman is subtler than McX in supporting theories about Pegasus. This, of course, seems to imply that one of the two fictional philosophers is subtler than the other. However, according to Quine, *(1*)* needs to be rephrased in *(2*)*: "A unique thing is Wyman and is one of those subtler minds [subtler than McX]", or "A unique thing *wymanizes* and is one of those subtler minds [subtler than McX]". Since Quine also endorses the ontological commitment, then we have *(3*)*: "There exists exactly one X such that this X *wymanizes* and is one of those subtler minds [subtler than McX]". Consequently, because such an X does not exist, then proposition *(3*)* is false. According to the Quinean view, Quine himself cannot state that *(1*)* is true.

Let's discuss two other examples, one for each fictional character, and let's see why the Quinean translation can be problematic for Quine himself. He argues against McX, who "thinks he could not meaningfully repudiate Pegasus", and he claims that McX "confused the alleged *named object* Pegasus with the *meaning* of the word Pegasus" (Quine 1948, p. 28). In order to do so, Quine is required to be committed to the statement according to which McX believes in the impossibility of repudiating Pegasus. Otherwise, there would be no reason to argue against McX. However, if the Quinean strategy is applied, this is no longer possible. Consider the following proposition *(1**)*: "McX thinks he could not meaningfully repudiate Pegasus" (Quine 1948, p. 3). According to Quine, *(1**)* needs to be read as *(2**)* "A unique thing is McX [or *mcXizes*] and thinks he could not meaningfully repudiate Pegasus" or *(3**)* "There exists exactly one X such that this X is McX [or *mcXizes*] and this X thinks he could not meaningfully repudiate Pegasus". Since such X does not exist, then *(3**)* is false. Nevertheless, Quine needs to assume *(3**)* as true in order to be able to argue

against McX. He needs to assume as true the fact that 'McX thinks he could not meaningfully repudiate Pegasus', even though, according to his own theory, this has to be false.

Similarly Quine thinks that "Wyman's (…) universe is, in many ways, unlovely" (Quine 1948, p. 23) because it includes all the non-existent objects (all the unactualized *possibles*). This is why Wyman's ontological catalogue "offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes" (Quine 1948, p. 2). However, according to Quine himself, it is false that Wyman has an overpopulated universe because there is nothing true about fictional objects. The proposition "Wyman's (…) universe is, in many ways, unlovely" implies that Wyman has a universe and that this universe is actually unpleasant. Consider, then, the proposition *(1***)* "Wyman has an unlovely universe" that, according to Quine, is equivalent to *(2***)*: "A unique thing *wymanizes* and has an unlovely universe" and to *(3***)*: "There exists exactly one X such that this X *wymanizes* and this X has an unlovely universe". Since this X does not exist, *(3***)* is false. In order to meaningfully argue against Wyman, *(3***)* must be true and this forces Quine to be pragmatically inconsistent.

These three examples are not random and isolated. Quine is referring to non-existent objects pragmatically contradicting his own theory 45 times over 10 pages[2]. Out of 53 paragraphs, 23 are referring to fictional objects

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[2] In Quine (1948), consider the following pages: page 21, second paragraph, the sentences starting with [1] 'Suppose now ...', [2] 'Suppose McX ...', [3] 'McX can ...', [4] 'I should protest ...'; page 21, second paragraph, the sentence starting with [5] 'When I try ...'; page 22, first paragraph, the sentences starting with [6] 'It is some ...', [7] 'If Pegasus ...'; page 22, second paragraph, the sentence starting with [8] 'McX cannot …'; page 22, third paragraph, the sentences starting with [9] 'McX never …', [10] 'The Parthenon is …', [11] 'But when we …'; page 22, third paragraph, the sentences starting with [12] 'The notion that …', [13] 'Wyman mantains …'; page 23, first paragraph, the sentences starting with [14] 'Wyman is …', [15] 'However, Wyman …'; page 23, second paragraph, the sentences starting with [16] 'Wyman's overpopulated …', [17] 'Wyman's slum …', [18] 'By a Fregean …'; page 24, second paragraph, the sentences starting with [19] 'Still, all the …', [20] 'If so, a …'; page 24, third paragraph, the sentences starting with [21] 'Wyman was not ...', [22] 'The tradition ...', [23] 'Still, I wonder ...'; page 26, first paragraph, the sentence starting with [24] 'The unanalyzed ...'; page 27, third paragraph, the sentences starting with [25] 'Neither we …', [26] 'Wyman and McX …'; page 28, second paragraph, sentences starting with [27] 'An inkling ...', [28] 'Confusion of …', [29] 'It is the …'; page 29, first paragraph, the sentences starting with [30] 'McX, characteristically ...', [31] 'For McX ...', [32] 'McX's conceptual schema ...'; page 29, second paragraph, the sentences starting with [33] 'Judges in …', [34] 'That the houses …'; page 30, first paragraph, the sentences starting with [35] 'One means …', [36] 'McX cannot ...'; page 30, second paragraph, the sentence starting with [37] 'However, McX …'; page 30, third paragraph, the sentences starting with [38] 'For McX, …', [39] 'McX and I …', [40] 'Even though …'; page 31, second paragraph, the sentence starting with [41] 'At this point, McX ...'; page 35, first paragraph, the sentences starting with [42] 'the predicament ...', [43] 'So long as ...', [44] 'I can ...'; page 35, second paragraph, the sentence starting with [45] 'Disagreement in …'.

and out of 256 sentences, 52 state something about non-existent entities that is endorsed as true by Quine himself. Even though 'On what there is' is supposed to be only 'on what exists', more or less 20% of the paper is 'on what there is not'. According to this 20%, Quine is not Quinean enough because all his arguments need to assume that there is something true about non-existent objects. Unfortunately, this is exactly what his own theory forbids.

3. Distinguish the undistinguishable

A possible way of escaping those pragmatic contradictions is to present Quine's main philosophical message without using or being committed to any fictional object. Nevertheless, this does not save Quine from all his troubles. The situation is definitely more complicated than it looks.

According to Quine, since "the concept of identity is simply inapplicable to unactualized possibles" (Quine 1948, p. 23), it is impossible to distinguish between non-existent objects. We cannot tell whether, given a possible fat man in that doorway and a possible bald man in that doorway, the two men are the same person or not. Quine provocatively asks: "How many possible men are there in that doorway?" and "what sense can be found in talking of entities which cannot meaningfully be said to be identical with them-selves and distinct from one another?" (Quine 1948, p. 23). None, of course! This string of rhetorical questions is enough to dismiss Wyman's idea that there are non-existent objects.

If Wyman and McX are fictional objects and, if fictional objects don't exist, then, according to Quine, he should not be able to identify nor dis-tinguish the two philosophical caricatures. However, that's not really the case since the whole paper represents the effort of distinguishing and criti-cizing the different positions of the two fictional philosophers. Quine openly states so: "I try to formulate our difference of opinion [in this specific case, the difference between McX, Wyman and Quine himself]" (Quine 1948, p. 22). Moreover, it is only possible for Quine to argue in two different ways, according to the two different positions supported by McX and Wyman, because he can indeed distinguish between them. Otherwise, it would be impossible to formulate two different arguments against the two different fictional philosophers. For instance, Quine claims that McX is mistaken in confusing between the 'object that does not exist' and 'the idea of the object that does not exist' and, according to his own work, he cannot attribute the same mistake to Wyman since Wyman supports another view.

Not only does Quine *indirectly* recognize that Wyman is not McX but he does so *directly* as well. For instance, consider again proposition (*1**) according to which Wyman's mind is "subtler" than McX's (Quine 1948,

p. 22) in proposing "less patently misguided [theories]" (Quine 1948, p. 22). Stating that Wyman is subtler than McX implies the recognition of a difference between the two fictional characters. This is exactly what Quine thinks as impossible about non-existent objects.

Of course, there is nothing necessarily wrong in distinguishing between fictional objects. This might even be intuitive. Let's imagine if we could remove, from that doorway, the fat man and the bald man, and put, exactly in the same doorway, McX and Wyman. Probably someone would say that they are not the same fictional object and, among all possible philosophies of fiction, some of them support exactly this intuition. For example, according to a specific version of Meinongianism called *noneism*, McX and Wyman are different because they have distinct (extensional) properties. As "Pegasus is distinguished from Thunderhead because Pegasus has the (extensional) property of being winged and Thunderhead does not" (Routley 1982, p. 156), McX is distinguishable from Wyman because the first one has the (extensional) property of being a platonist while the latter one does not. However, since Quine cannot afford any theory of non-existent objects (since there are no such things as non-existent objects), then, in distinguishing between McX and Wyman, he does exactly what, according to his own theory, he should not be able to do. He distinguishes between what he declares undistinguishable. Once again, Quine is pragmatically inconsistent.

At this point, it would be legitimate to ask why this second problem cannot be avoided using the same strategy previously suggested: could Quine defend his position presenting his philosophical message without using or being committed to any fictional object? Perhaps yes, but still this second case looks more problematic than the first one.

Quine, stating that the concept of self-identity is "inapplicable" (Quine 1948, p. 23) to fictional objects, claims that we *should not* and we *cannot* distinguish between non-existent entities. The example of the fat man in the doorway is supposed to show that counting or distinguishing between fictional objects is not simply *wrong* but it is also *impossible*. According to Quine, if claiming something true about non-existent entities is mistaken but still feasible, distinguishing between fictional objects is just *impossible* since no one can reasonably do it. For example, it is not possible to say how many fictional men are on that doorway. However, if this is the case, then Quine faces a problem which is not solvable by changing the rhetoric of his paper. Even though he could certainly make his point without any fictional character, he still *did* what he claimed was actually *impossible* to do (namely, he meaningfully distinguished between McX and Wyman) showing that it was not impossible at all. In this second case, presenting his argument without non-existent objects is not going to help Quine because, according to his own theory, he did not only do something wrong: he did

something *impossible*. If he can distinguish between McX and Wyman, then it is not impossible to distinguish between non-existent objects. Since Quine claims that distinguishing between fictional objects is impossible, one example according to which non-existent entities are self-identical and distinguishable is enough to show that it is not impossible at all. What is remarkable here is that Quine himself, endorsing the impossibility of distinguishing between fictional objects, provides a counterexample to his own theory. And, as I've already said, one example of the possibility of distinguishing between fictional objects is enough to reject the impossibility of having self-identical and distinguishable *fictionalia*.

Let's state some last remarks, before the conclusion. An anonymous referee of an earlier draft of this paper challenged the argument presented here with three main counterarguments. What follows are my replies. **(1)** First of all, the referee claims that Quine can easily answer [my] objection by invoking his concept of semantic ascent which allows him to turn from the (fictional) objects he talks about to the words he uses to talk about them. I take the objection of the referee as saying that, when Quine talks about McX or Wyman, he actually talks about 'McX' or 'Wyman'. According to this position, Quine does not refer to any fictional object at all. However, it is clear that Quine does not apply any semantic ascent, treating McX and Wyman as objects and not as linguistic constituents. For instance, Quine claims that the two fictional philosophers hold some ontological beliefs and, more specifically, that Wyman's universe is unlovely. But, of course, linguistic constructions (as words or nouns) do not have beliefs and they don't have specific views about the universe either. Moreover, Quine's paper will continue to be pragmatically inconsistent, even if we apply the semantic ascent to sentences and not to nouns (Willard 1983). Indeed, when Quine argues against McX and Wyman, he does not want to show that the proposition "Wyman or McX claims X" is false but he wants to claim that "X" which is supported by Wyman or McX is false. Once again, in order to do so, Quine needs to assume the McX and Wyman actually support "X" which is something that he cannot presuppose given his own ontological position. **(2)** Secondly, the referee claims that Quine is entitled to create a work of fiction because fictions are about the customary sense of non-referring expressions, much as they are for Frege. However, Quine is famous for rejecting the notion of 'sense' (Quine 1951) and, for this reason, his view is not compatible with Frege's position. **(3)** Finally, the referee seems to suggest an interpretation, which locates Quine's fictional objects in an intentional context. However, as a matter of fact, such a context is not explicit and, in Quine's paper, there are no fictional operators such as 'imagine that'. Moreover, even with fictional operators, he would have been in trouble anyway, because he should not have been able to assume anything true about fictional objects which is something that, nevertheless, he constantly does.

4. Conclusion

In order to criticize Quine, philosophers usually claim that his solution does not do justice to our common sense (Berto 2013; Parsons 1980; Priest 2005) stealing "much of the terminology we ordinarily use to state, and argue, […] elementary facts" (Routley 1982, p. 151). Thus, they appeal to different intuitions developing different theories. However, this paper does not deny the general validity of Quine's philosophical position nor does it cast any doubt on the grounding intuitions. This note, without rejecting the view that to be is to be the value of a bound variable, establishes the pragmatic inconsistency of Quine's theorizing in 'On what there is'.

Acknowledgements

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