

WHY PLATO'S BEARD MIGHT NOT BE GENERALLY MISDIRECTED

There is something, which Quine in his paper 'On What There Is' calls the 'old Platonic riddle of nonbeing'. This puzzle led philosophers to countenance objects which intuitively do not exist, e.g. unactualised possibles horses. Quine argues that there is no need to accept them, because the puzzle rests on an assumption – 'Plato's Beard' – which is not only false, but generally misdirected.

First I will introduce the puzzle and trace Quine's argument against Plato's Beard. Afterwards I will contemplate his further argumentation for the conclusion that Plato's Beard is generally misdirected and finally I will argue against it.

1. Plato's Beard

Quine describes an ontological dispute and the predicament of someone who wants to deny that there are certain objects: it appears that he cannot describe what is going on without admitting the objects he wants to deny. Quine formulates this 'old Platonic riddle of nonbeing' as follows:¹

[Quine I]

Nonbeing must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not?

QI might be understood like this: an object which has in one sense of 'being' no being, must in at least one other sense have being; and this is because we cannot say of an object that it has no being, if there is no sense of 'being' at all in which it has being.

The issue *seems* to arise when we *talk* about nonbeing: whenever we ascribe a quality, we ascribe it to an object; and we need to *refer* to it in order to ascribe the quality. If the object is not, we cannot refer to it, and thus we cannot ascribe nonbeing to it. Therefore we say something *senseless* when we try to deny the being of something, which is not.² The assumption on which the puzzle rests is

[Plato's *B* Beard]

We cannot meaningfully deny the existence of something which is not.

In *PB* I used 'existence' instead of 'being', because it seems to be a specifically philosophical custom to talk about *being*. Furthermore, I added 'which is not', since someone might perfectly well meaningfully deny the existence of something; namely by denying the existence of something which does exist. Although the assertion would be false, it would be meaningful.

¹ Quine 1948: 1f.

² It *might* be also possible to hold that we would thereby say something *inconsistent* or *false*. Quine (1952: 220) argues that it is no good to take these statements as false, for if they were false, their negations would be true. But since 'Vulcan exists' is not true, 'Vulcan does not exist' cannot be false. Because Quine is concerned with the view that statements such as 'Vulcan does not exist' were "nonsense", I shall talk about this view.

What are the reasons to accept *PB*? Suppose someone wants to deny the existence of something. She may try and utter a sentence of the form 'e does not exist'. Let *N* be a sentence of this form, where a singular term is inserted for 'e'. Now we can formulate an argument:³

- P1* If *N* is meaningful, the singular term inserted for 'e' refers.
P2 If the singular term inserted for 'e' refers, there is something to which it refers.
C If there is nothing to which it refers, *N* is meaningless.

C is more specific than *PB*, because it is about sentences of a certain form by which we deny the existence of something. One particular consequence of *PB* is that by uttering *N* it is only possible to say something false or meaningless, but it is not possible to express a truth.

2. 'Plato's Beard is false'

A statement like 'Vulcan does not exist' is intuitively *true*, which cannot be the case according to *PB*. In order to adhere to the view that such a statement is true, and to deal with the puzzle, philosophers countenanced the existence of objects which intuitively do not exist. Quine argues that *PB* is false, such that it gives no reason at all to include those objects in ones ontology.

He attacks the first premise of the argument and asks: is it really the case that a singular term inserted for 'e' has to refer in order for *N* to be meaningful? According to Quine, Russell's theory of definite descriptions⁴ can be used to show that this is not the case.

How does it work? I take it as a common view that definite descriptions are singular terms:⁵ terms which purport to denote one and only one object. In particular, they are singular terms of the form 'the *F*', such as 'the sister of Shakespeare'.⁶ They purport to denote the unique object of which the predicate, represented by '*F*', is true.⁷ Russell analyses phrases of the form 'the *F*' systematically as fragments of sentences in which they occur. Since they are supposed to be *incomplete symbols*, no unified expression remains, and thus no expression purporting to denote a unique object. Here is an example for an application of Russell's analysis. *SI** analyses *SI*:

- SI* The red planet is big.
*SI** Something is a red planet and is big and nothing else is a red planet.

Quine holds that *SI** can be properly translated into a semi-formal language of classical logic: the English sentence *means the same as* the semi-formalised sentence. In particular he maintains that the existential quantifier is synonymous with the corresponding phrases 'There is (an *x* such that)' and 'There exists (an *x* such that)'. This is a translation of *SI**:

³ I got the idea to formulate the premises like I did from Cartwright (1960: 630).

⁴ Russell 1905.

⁵ Nevertheless there *are* philosophers using 'singular term' in a way that definite descriptions are no singular terms.

⁶ Phrases which can, without loss or gain of meaning, be transformed (or translated) into phrases of the form 'the *F*', such as 'Shakespeare's sister' or 'Shakespeares Schwester', are also regarded as definite descriptions.

⁷ Quine 1952: 205; 216.

$S1^{**}$ $\exists x (x \text{ is a red planet} \ \& \ \exists y (y \text{ is a red planet} \rightarrow x=y) \ \& \ x \text{ is big}).$

By simple laws of the predicate-calculus of natural deduction it follows:

$S1^{***}$ $\exists x (x \text{ is a red planet}).$

Since $S1^{***}$ means that there is something which is a red planet, we commit ourselves by uttering $S1$ to there being something which is a red planet.⁸ Now, consider a sentence of the form $N, S2$, which is analysed by $S2^{**}$:

$S2$ The intra-mercurial planet does not exist.

$S2^*$ There is no intra-mercurial planet or there is more than one intra-mercurial planet.

$S2^{**}$ $\sim \exists x (x \text{ is an intra-mercurial planet} \ \& \ \exists y (y \text{ is an intra-mercurial planet} \rightarrow x=y)).$

$S2^{**}$ is a *negative* existential sentence and does *not* entail that there is an intra-mercurial planet. Since we do not refer to an intra-mercurial planet by uttering $S2$, and since $S2$ is meaningful, we *can* meaningfully deny the existence of something which is not. Therefore, PB is false.

Quine's argument rejects PB and I think it is all that is really needed to reject PB . But Quine goes on to argue that we *generally* utter a meaningful sentence by uttering a sentence of the form '*e* does not exist':⁹ this is not only the case if we fill in definite descriptions for '*e*', but also if we substitute other terms, e.g. proper names, such as 'Rome' or 'Romeo'.

3. 'Plato's Beard is generally misdirected'

How can we say something meaningful by uttering the sentence 'Vulcan does not exist'? Quine claims that Russell's analysis can be applied to such sentences as well. Let us call the assumption he makes to argue for this claim 'Quine's Razor':¹⁰

[Quine's Razor]

A singular term can always be expanded into a definite description.

Now, if the singular term inserted for '*e*' in N is a name, we only have to rephrase it as a definite description. We may rephrase 'Vulcan' as 'the intra-mercurial planet'. Now we can go on analysing 'Vulcan does not exist' by substituting the definite description for the name:

$S3$ Vulcan does not exist.

$S3^*$ The intra-mercurial planet does not exist.

$S3^{**}$ $\sim \exists x (x \text{ is an intra-mercurial planet} \ \& \ \exists y (y \text{ is an intra-mercurial planet} \rightarrow x=y)).$

Quine admits that in some cases we might not be able to find a translation for a name, because some names correspond to especially "obscure or basic" notions, for which we have no

⁸ I will not go into Quine's reasons for that.

⁹ At least if we exclude *meaningless* singular terms to be substituted for '*e*'.

¹⁰ Quine 1948: 8.

independently established phrases. For these cases a device is required how to find translations systematically. Quine's proposal is¹¹

[Quine 2]

we could have appealed to the *ex hypothesi* unanalyzable, irreducible attribute of *being Pegasus*, adopting, for its expression, the verb "is-Pegasus", or "pegasizes". The noun "Pegasus" itself could then be treated as derivative, and identified after all with a description: "the thing that is-Pegasus", "the thing that pegasizes".

In *Q2*, Quine proposes that *S3* could be analysed by *S3*** if 'Vulcan' corresponds to an obscure or basic notion:

*S3** The thing that vulcans (is-Vulcan) does not exist.

*S3*** $\sim \Box x (x \text{ vulcans (is-Vulcan)} \ \& \ \Box y (y \text{ vulcans (is-Vulcan)} \ \rightarrow \ x=y))$.

Quine believes that we can – with the help of this device – translate *every* singular term by a definite description, and thus that *QR* holds. He argues that *PB* is generally misdirected *because QR* holds. I will argue against *QR*.

4. Plato's Beard might not be generally misdirected!

4.1. QR has artificial results

I take it that *PB* is meant to imply a claim about natural language: *in our use of natural language* we cannot meaningfully deny the existence of something which is not. To show that this is false, one has to explain how the existence of something can be meaningfully denied *in natural language*. Thus the proposal should not be artificial. And this is precisely what Quine's proposal seems to be.

It is a consequence of *QR* that *names* can be expanded into definite descriptions. But names are expressions which do not describe the objects they designate, whereas definite descriptions do. Thus it is artificial to translate names by definite descriptions.¹²

The device to translate names systematically has even more artificial results. According to this method, 'Vulcan' is translated by 'the thing that vulcans' or 'the thing that is-Vulcan', where 'is-Vulcan' and 'vulcans' are to be novel predicates. First, we have to accept a lot of new predicates, adopting this method. Secondly, it seems to be *ad hoc* to accept them only because we need translations for names corresponding to obscure or basic notions. In addition, these predicates are peculiar. Most likely, 'is-Vulcan' does not apply to an object under the same conditions under which a common predicate like 'is orange' does: while 'is-Vulcan' seems to apply to an object only if 'Vulcan' is a name given to that object, an object satisfying 'is orange' does not have to bear the name 'orange' or any other name at all.

¹¹ Quine 1948: 8.

¹² The same argument applies with respect to pronouns and numerals, since they also do not describe the objects they designate.

4.2. QR is false under its best interpretation

It is not very clear what it means to say that a singular term can always be *expanded* into a definite description. The expansions, or translations, are supposed to help us giving *analyses*. The main feature of analysis and translations is to give new expressions that have the same meaning as the analysed or translated ones. If something lacks this feature, it does not seem to be an analysis or a translation at all. The best thing to do is thus to interpret Quine as stating that a singular term can always be expanded to a definite description *salva sensu*. The relation between names and their expansions is thus the relation of *synonymy*.¹³

But there are some well-known objections against this very claim, given by Saul Kripke in his famous lectures 'Naming and Necessity'. I will trace only his modal argument, although the others – the epistemic argument and the arguments from ignorance and error – apply as well.

In his argument, Kripke uses the notion of a *rigid designator*: a singular term is a *rigid designator* iff it designates the same object with respect to every possible situation in which it exists and never another one.¹⁴ 'Dublin' is rigid, whereas 'the capital of Ireland' is not, since it does not designate Dublin in a situation in which Kilkenny, for instance, is the capital.

Suppose that *QR* is true under the given interpretation and that 'Dublin' is translated by, and synonymous with, 'the capital of Ireland'. If this is the case, 'Dublin' is not rigid, since 'the capital of Ireland' is not. But 'Dublin' *is* rigid. Therefore, the expressions are not synonymous.¹⁵ The argument applies with respect to other translations as well, because names are generally rigid while usual definite descriptions are not. What *QR* suggests, that names are synonymous with *usual* definite descriptions, is thus false.¹⁶

Does the argument apply as well to the claim that names are synonymous with definite descriptions which we obtain by application of Quine's device? To figure out if it does, we shall have a closer look on these expressions. According to the device, 'Dublin' is translated by 'the thing that dublins' or 'the thing that is-Dublin'. Quine holds that the predicate 'is-Dublin' is composed of the copula and a general term. But instead of building a usual predicate, 'is' and 'Dublin' are to be "indissoluble".¹⁷ Why does he want them to be indissoluble?

Firstly, Quine cannot treat 'Dublin' as a singular term, because it would need to be translated again. One interpretation is thus that by treating the predicate as indissoluble, he just wants to *stress* that 'Dublin' is no singular term. But if that is all, Kripke's argument applies as well.

Secondly, Quine cannot treat the 'is' as the 'is' of identity if 'Dublin' is no singular term, since the 'is' of identity connects singular terms. Another interpretation might thus be that Quine *wants* the 'is' to be at least something very like the 'is' of identity; and by using a hyphen he indicates that the 'is' is something very like the 'is' of identity. In this case, Kripke's argument

¹³ Quine might also hold the view that the relation is not the relation of sameness of *meaning* but of *truth conditions plus something more*. But if he does, it is dubious what this means.

¹⁴ Kripke 1980: 48.

¹⁵ Kripke 1980: 57.

¹⁶ Quine might try to specify a *special* kind of definite description which translates names.

¹⁷ Quine 1960: 178f.

might be blocked, since 'the thing that is-Dublin' could be treated as rigid, because the predicate it contains involves something like an identity sign, such that something which is-Dublin is-Dublin in every possible situation, and 'the thing that is-Dublin' designates it in every possible situation. But the interpretation is very obscure: although it is indicated *that* there is some special relation between 'is' and the general term 'Dublin', it is still unexplained *what* it is like.

Conclusion

Quine's argument that *PB* is false is convincing. However, his argument that *PB* is generally misdirected is not, since there are objections against the assumption *QR*, on which it rests. Firstly, it is *artificial* to translate all singular terms by definite descriptions, especially by definite descriptions like 'the thing that is-Dublin': the device to do so seems to be *ad hoc* and forces us to accept a lot of novel predicates which are in addition peculiar. Secondly, Quine seems to be committed to the claim that names are synonymous with definite descriptions, to which Kripke's modal argument applies. Thus, I conclude that Quine has not yet shown that Plato's Beard is generally misdirected.

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