

## WHY PLATO'S BEARD MIGHT NOT BE GENERALLY MISDIRECTED

### 1. *Plato's Beard*

*Puzzle of nonbeing* Nonbeing must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not?

The puzzle of nonbeing led philosophers to countenance objects which intuitively do not exist. Quine argues that there is no need to do that because it rests on a false principle:

*Plato's Beard (PB)* We cannot meaningfully deny the existence of something which is not.

#### *Argument for Plato's Beard*

$N$  is a sentence of the form ' $e$  does not exist' with a singular term inserted for ' $e$ ':

$P1$  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.

### 2. '*Plato's Beard is false*'

Intuitively, a statement like 'Vulcan does not exist' is true. Since this cannot be the case according to  $PB$ , the argument for  $PB$  is not sound. So, Quine denies  $P1$ .

He uses Russell's theory of definite descriptions to argue for that claim. This is a Russellian analysis of a sentence  $N$ , where 'the intra-mercurial planet' is inserted for ' $e$ ':

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

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

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

$S2$  can be meaningful although the singular term 'the intra-mercurial' does not refer. Thus we can meaningfully deny the existence of something which is not. Therefore,  $PB$  is false.

### 3. '*Plato's Beard is generally misdirected*'

Quine argues that  $PB$  is generally misdirected because Quine's Razor holds:

*Quine's Razor (QR)* A singular term can always be expanded into a definite description.

If  $QR$  is true, every sentence  $N$  can be transformed into a sentence to which the analysis applies. Because names corresponding to 'obscure or basic' notions might not have established translations, Quine offers a proposal how to translate them systematically. According to it, 'Vulcan' can be translated by 'The thing that *vulcans*' or 'The thing that *is-Vulcan*'.

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

##### 4.1. QR has artificial results

- i. Unlike definite descriptions, names do not describe the objects they designate.
- ii. Adopting QR, we have to accept a lot of novel predicates.
- iii. We have to accept them for the only purpose of having translations for names corresponding to peculiar notions.
- iv. These novel predicates are peculiar ones.

##### 4.2. QR is false under its best interpretation

How can we interpret QR?

A singular term can always be expanded into an ordinary definite description *salva sensu*.

Under this interpretation QR entails

S Names are synonymous with ordinary definite descriptions.

If S holds, there is a definite description which is synonymous with 'Dublin', e.g. 'the capital of Ireland'. There is an argument which shows that this is false and which can be applied no matter what usual definite description we choose as a translation for 'Dublin':

- (1) 'Dublin' is synonymous with 'the capital of Ireland'.
- (2) If (1), 'Dublin' is no rigid designator.
- (3) 'Dublin' is a rigid designator.
- (C) (1) is false.

Does it also apply to the claim that names are synonymous with definite descriptions like 'the thing that is-Dublin'? 'the thing that is-Dublin' contains the predicate 'is-Dublin' which Quine regards as 'indissoluble'. How can we understand it?

Interpretation I: By treating 'is-Dublin' as an indissoluble predicate Quine just wants to stress that 'Dublin' is no singular term.

Motivation: 'Dublin' cannot be a singular term because it would need to be translated again.

Problem: If that is all, the argument applies.

Interpretation II: The 'is' in 'is-Dublin' is not the 'is' of identity, because the 'is' of identity connects singular terms. But it is very *similar* to the 'is' of identity (and Quine indicates this by treating 'is-Dublin' as an indissoluble predicate).

Motivation: If it were similar, the argument could be blocked.

Problem: It is unexplained what the relation between 'is' and the general term is.