Metaphysics // Fall 2016

Handout 4

Existence: Quine

Criterion of ontological commitment. We speak of various things out there in the world, but is there a principled way of formulating a criterion of our commitment to the existence of entities? The question is whether an ontological commitment is expressed in a discourse, in a theory, in a linguistic medium generally.

Suppose I were to say:

Humanity is evil. (4-1)

Suppose I believe this sentence be true. Do I then commit myself to the existence of 'humanity', an abstract object, and a property of evil, another abstract object? What about 'is'? Do I also commit myself to the existence of a copula? If we want to avoid an absurd mess like this, we have to say that only those terms that *refer* should carry the burden of ontological commitment. Does 'humanity' refer then? No: in uttering (4-1) I refer only to individual people. I paraphrase (4-1) as:

Every human is evil.

This will be rendered in first-order logic as:

$$\forall x(Hx \rightarrow Ex).$$

There are two ways for this sentence to be true: if there are no humans (the sentence is *vacuously* true then) and if every *existent* human is evil. Ignoring the first alternative, I will write:

$$Ha \,\&\, Ea.$$

What does the symbol 'a' stand here for? Not a proper name (see Remark 1). Rather, a free variable (or a parameter). In any case, we can now close the sentence with an existential quantifier:

$$\exists x(Hx \,\&\, Ex).$$

Thus ontological commitment is reflected in the use of the existential quantifier. Nothing is left of the commitment to the existence of either 'humanity' or 'evil'.

Remark 1 (Quine on proper names). Many theorists included proper names as indicators of the ontological commitment of the given discourse. Carnap is among them. Quine, however, harbours deep aversion to proper names. For reasons that need not detain us at the moment, he believes that sentences containing them can be eliminated in favour of existentially quantified sentence. Thus 'Socrates is mad' will be paraphrased as:

$$\exists x(Sx \,\&\, \forall y(Sy \rightarrow x = y) \,\&\, Mx).$$

The trick is to introduce the predicate S that uniquely applies to Socrates. In English we could then say, 'Some thing socratizes just in case that thing is identical to Socrates.' As a result, with proper names excluded, existentially quantified sentences will remain the only channel of ontological commitment.

Category and sub-class questions. Quine interprets external questions as being the questions about a whole category of entities: 'Are there numbers?', 'Are there material things?' In this sense, if numbers and things are designated by separate kinds of variables, the answers to that question will 'exhaust' the range of bound variables. By contrast, if the question is 'Are there prime numbers?' or 'Is there a number two?', the answers will not exhaust the range.

Category questions are supposed to correspond to external questions, and sub-class questions to internal ones. Quine then argues that any such distinction is essentially trivial, parochial even. But whatever his reasons are, the problem is that Carnap need not be committed to any such distinction. Category questions can be interpreted as general internal questions. They can be answered within a given framework.

Even more bizarre is the insistence on identifying sub-class questions with internal questions. It can easily be that our variables range over both things and numbers. Then the question 'Are there numbers?' would qualify, by Quine's lights, as a sub-class question.

Analytic-synthetic distinction. Another line of Quine's attack is that the distinction between external and internal questions corresponds to the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. External questions are all analytic. Internal questions mostly are, with the exception of the questions concerning the existence of numbers etc.

But the objection does not seem too convincing either. All we need to do, from Carnap's point of view, is to be able to identify different frameworks—i.e. identify different regimented languages. Then we should be able to identify semantical rules governing the use of the expressions in the given language. Without these rules there is no way to identify languages at all. Once we have these rules, we can then have our particular internal questions and general internal questions. Then Carnap's claim should be that any questions of existence that fall outside the scope of such questions are external. What does that mean? It should mean that these questions are asked before the semantical rules are laid down, i.e. asked outside any specific framework.

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