Metaphysics // Fall 2018

Handout 10 [*incomplete*]

Ontology and make-believe: Yablo

What Quine has missed. Observe the point made just a bit earlier: according to Quine, practical reasons driving the framework adoption, have to be based on evidence, hence indistinguishable in principle from theoretical reasons. There is, then, no way to distinguish between 'practical assertion' and 'theoretical assertion'. But is this so? Cannot we conceive of making statements in indicative mood (as opposed to imperative and interrogative) whose truth we nevertheless do not accept? 241

Yes, we can! People often engage in a kind of talk where they use sentences in indicative mood (declaratives) whilst begging *not* to be taken seriously. If taken seriously, they assert patent falsehoods. If, however, they are not taken seriously, or better, *not literally*, then their statements may be useful in describing reality. In some sense, to be clarified further, their statements when not taken seriously, are nevertheless true (or if they are false, then not trivially so). 243-4

Myths and reality. There are, we say, two kinds of myths. In one sense (Yablo's myth_1) they are statements or beliefs that evidence tells me to dismiss. Hence the myth of Aphrodite and Paris. In the other sense, though (Yablo's myth_2), they are beliefs and statements that a game of pretence (make-believe) tells me to accept. Hence the myth of the Trojan war. Homer the mythmaker tells me to make-believe, or imagine, that the Trojan war is a fact. I go along with the pretence, but the belief in the Trojan war may well be supported by historical evidence. Whether it is so supported is, however, irrelevant to its status as a myth in this second sense. 244

Let us see the significance of myth_2 for Quine's programme for ontology. Our ontological commitments (=beliefs about what exists) are the ontological commitments of the best scientific theory T. We committed to the existence of x if existential quantification over x is required for the statements of T to be true. But how can we now separate between the statements of T that are literally true and those statements that we only have to pretend to be true? 245

There are two responses a Quinean is expected to make:

(A) Make-believe statements will never be part of the best theory T. Science is serious, make-believe is not. Science describes, make-believe plays.
(B) Though at some stage of scientific development it is necessary to include make-believe statements, as science matures, those statements will be eliminated.

Prop-oriented make-believe. In section XI Yablo addresses the response (A). Thinking about make-believe naturally begins with thinking about children's games that are played for joy. But it does not have to stop there. Walton's example of Italy and Crotone illustrates how this can be done. There are countless examples in actual scientific practice. Rutherford's notorious model of atom as a small Solar system (still taught at schools) is an instance of make-believe. Not even Rutherford himself would have taken it fully seriously: electrons may have 'orbits', but it is wrong to ask (even according to Rutherford) how long does it take for electron to revolve around the nucleus. This make-believe game is itself an instance of a scientific model, a fictional representation. Such representations can possess all the familiar scientific virtues, such as offering help in systematising facts, making connections between them, aiding memory, and identifying further lines of research. 246 247

Essential make-believe. If we are now convinced that make-believe is scientifically useful, could it be nevertheless be eliminated in the course of scientific progress? This is the response (B).

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