QUINE ON ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

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Of many problems that are concerned with philosophy, the ontological problem is associated with that part of metaphysical problem under which the question, what there is? is taken into account. As regards this question both in Indian and Western tradition in ancient and medieval times philosophers were busied with the explication of ontological problem. Owing to the predominance of religious world-view in those days philosophers had tended to embark on this problem on the basis of speculative metaphysics and religious concepts. Although twentieth century philosophers have revived their predecessors' ideas about the ontological problem in terms of logical analysis and modern logic, but no philosopher seems to have been able to provide satisfactory solution to this problem. It is W.V.O. Quine who has tried to solve this problem in a new fashion.

Quine's approach to ontological problem is observed with his notion of quantification and of identity.[1] According to Quine's notion of quantification, 'to be is to be the value of variables', and his notion of identity provides that 'there is no entity without identity'. The former notion provides a test of 'what a given remark or doctrine, ours or someone else's, says there is', and thus introduces Quine's criterion of ontological commitment. The latter notion brings out the fact that only those entities should be admissible for which adequate criteria of identity can be provided, and thus introduces Quine's standards of ontological admissibility. In this paper I shall concentrate only on what Quine has said about ontological commitment.

Quine puts his criterion of ontological commitment on the line of

Plato's doctrine of ontology. When Plato talked of ontology, he admitted of the existence of non-being as well as of being. Plato expressed his views on the existence of non-being like this: Non-being must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not?

Apparently, since we consider, according to Plato, something as 'non-being' so 'non-being' must necessarily be. Historically, Plato's doctrine of ontology what Quine calls Plato's beard[3], has proved tough.

Like Plato, through formulating criterion of ontological commitment Quine tries to expose that we affirm that something exists in some sense or other. He means to say that when we do make assertion that something exists in some sense or other, it leads us to ontological commitment. This opinion of Quine about ontological commitment makes it clear that to say that we are committed to an ontology is nothing but just our way of saying that we affirm that something or other exists. Even the thinking of denial of being leads to the existence of being in some sense or the other.

Quine goes on to say that when one is just involved in ontological commitment, he is to use an existential quantifier. In other words, when one wants to say that something exists, he is to use an existential quantifier and then the objects which we consider to exist will be all and only those that are values of the variables which are bound by such existential quantifier, what logicians call bound variables.

What Quine is concerned to prove is that ontological commitment must be carried by bound variables, and even to prove that all general and singular terms or names that we commonly use like 'Descartes' are really abbreviations for descriptions. He means to say that all general and singular terms which are commonly regarded as names can be converted into descriptions, and then analyse out the descriptions in the way which Russell[4] has suggested in his theory of so-called singular descriptions or definite descriptions. In doing so, the meaning of general or singular terms or names remains unchanged. For example, 'Descartes' can be converted without the alteration of meaning into 'the father of modern Western philosophy'. In this

example, we use name meaningfully by supplying a definite description such a way in which there are no bound variables.

Here it is important to note that what bound variables carry ontological commitment disappears after translation and analysis. When one transforms all general or singular terms or names into definite description, one uses an ordinary predicate true of the individual denoted by a name. Quine further adds that if one faces some difficulty in finding a predicate true of the individual denoted by name, in that case he should construct artificial predicates as 'Descartes' can be replaced by 'the x which Descartises' or' (ix) (fx)'.

Again we can eliminate definite description in favour of quantifies, variables & identity. This is written as follows:

E : (ix) (fx) = $(\exists\ x)\ (y)\ (fy \equiv x = y)$ i.e, the f exists, means 'there is exactly one f (Descartes exists). Similarly, the x which is f is also g = 'there is exactly one f which is also g'. In symbolic way, this will be written as follows:

g [(ix) (fx)] = $(\exists\ x)[(y)\ (fy \equiv x = y).\ gx]$

The above description makes it clear that sentence containing names (as Descartes was the father of modern Western philosophy) can be converted into sentences containing description (The x which Descratises was the father of modern Western philosophy) and then into sentence containing only quantifiers and variables. Quine thus comes to hold that whatever we say with help of names can be said in a language which shuns names together[5] . and as such, names are immaterial to ontological commitment.

Now, what about fictional entities such as 'Pegasus', Unicorns' etc. In Quine's theory of ontological commitment. According to Quine, even such terms, which are commonly regarded as names can be converted into descriptions, and then analyse out the descriptions in the way, suggested by Russell in his theory of descriptions. For instance 'Pegasus' can be rephrased into a description as the 'winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon' Putting such a phrase in place of Pegasus, we can go ahead to analyze the

statement 'Pegasus is 'or' Pegasus is not' clearly on the analogy of Russell's analysis of 'the author of Walverly is' 'and the author of Waverly is not' or 'the present king of France is' and 'the present king of France is not'. If basic notions such as Pegasus have no possibility of pat translation into descriptive phases, then we can still adopt artificial device and transform Pegasus into 'the thing that is - Pegasus', or into 'the thing that Pegasizes'. If we interpret the alleged name 'Pegasus in terms of Pegasizing as a description under Russell's theory of descriptions, then the old notion that Pegasus can not be said not to be without presupposing that in some sense Pegasus is has been disposed of.

What Quine assumes is that we should accept a certain kind of entity to be existing. If an entity does not exist, we should not have any talk about that entity. Apparently, if Pegasus were not, we should not have any talking about Pegasus. Therefore, it would be nonsense to say that Pegasus is not. Quine expresses his view as follows:

'When we say of Pegasus that there is no such thing, we are saying, more precisely, that Pegasus does not have the special attribute of actuality.[6]

Thus the thinking of denial of even fictional entities leads to the existence of fictional entities in some sense or the other, and is as logically admissible as what Wyman,[7] a logician, has said that Parthenon is not red. Here we see that Quine is really in agreement with Plato in the sense that Quine admits that there are existence of both being and non-being. As he says,

'In either case we are saying something about an entity whose being is unquestioned'.[8]

The point here to be noted is that Quine gives the importance of bound variables to the ontological issues, it is not names but bound variables, which carry ontological commitment. He himself says,

'The only way in which we can involve ourselves in ontological commitments (is) by our use of bound variabes'.[9]

On this view, we are committed to ontology of abstract entities. Even he tries to show that how we could use seeming names or descriptive phrases meaningfully without supposing that these are entities allegedly named. The solution of ontological problems, according to Quine, consists in the elimination of description.

Here we see that like British empiricists (e.g. Berkeley and Hume), Quine, a scientific empiricist denies the reality of Universals on the ground of the bound variables, and asserts that when we say that 'some dogs are white', we mean that 'there are something that are dogs and also are white'; and, 'in order that this statement be true, the thing over which the bound variable' 'something' ranges must include some white dogs, but need not include doghood or whiteness. They (doghood and whiteness), being regarded as dependent objects, can never be the value of a propositional function. If a 'Universal' be not considered as a dependent object, it would have to be represented by a propositional function whose values would themselves be universal which is not possible; and therefore, Universals do not exist. Thus Quine, like Ayer, Plato, Aristotle, Nyāya-Vaiśesikas etc., believes in the reality of particulars.

Since Quine's theory of ontological commitment is based on the identification of particulars, ontological issues may be solved only on the surface of sensedata. Here we may say that what Quine means to say that ontological problems may be solved only on what we perceive is something else, called sense data. If it be so, a question may arise :, is it always the case that when we assert that $\emptyset a$, we imply that there is an x such that $\emptyset x$? Quine's answer to this question is that in asserting $\emptyset a$ we do not always imply that there is an x such that $\emptyset x$. In this connection, he takes an example of a disease: from the statement that appendicitis is dreaded, it need not follow that there exists something which is dreaded.[10] But he might want to say that when it is said that the assertion of $\emptyset a$ carries with it some ontological commitment, it does not entail that there is anything that satisfies $\emptyset$, but does entail that there is something that satisfies Ψ, a predicate of different order from $\emptyset$. For an example, if I say that David did see the ghost of his father, I

do not necessarily imply that there was anything that was both a ghost and what David saw. There was no ghost for David to see. In fact, he did see something, an illusion, a hallucination or a sense datum, the appearance of a ghost, which is sensed. Here at all event, something happened, meaning thereby that we are affirming a fact of some sort; and such 'facts' are described by means of choosing a conceptual scheme because it determines one's ontology. Here we have two conceptual schemes: Phenomenalistic one and physicalistic one. If we use, according to Quine, the phenomenalistic scheme, we shall regard the conceptual scheme of physical object as 'a convenient myth'. What Quine implies is that the truth-claim of language belonging to ontological statements depends on the truth-value of language of phenomenalistic statements. If this view be accepted, then statements about physical objects could be converted without changing of meaning into the statements about sense data. But Quine says that there is no likehood that each sentence about physical objects can actually be translated, however deviously and complexly, into the phenomenalistic language.'[11]

What he wants to say is that physical objects are nothing but 'postulated entities. 'Here a question arises, if physical objects be treated as merely 'postulated entities', how can it be decided that something is a postulated entity? Under what criterion we still refuse to say that physical objects exist? Quine himself does not have any solution to this problem.

It is A.J. Ayer who offers a solution to the above problem by saying that since physical objects do not satisfy the basic predicate, they do not exist. What criterion he has to solve the above problem is expressed as follows:

'Let us say that a predicate $\emptyset$ is reducible to a set of predicates, K, if it is not logically possible that anything should be experienced which exemplifies or manifests $\emptyset$ unless something exemplifies one or more members of K, but it is logically possible that something should be experienced which exemplifies or manifests a member of K even though nothing exemplifies $\emptyset$'. Here a member of predicates K will be regarded as a basic predicate. Let us say then

that a predicate is basic with respect to a given language if the language contains no predicates, or set of predicates, to which it is reducible. Then we may construe the statement that certain objects are postulated entities as a statement that certain predicates, namely those that ostensibly apply to the objects in question, are not basic.'[13] Thus according to Ayer, 'only that which satisfies the basic predicates will be admitted to exist.'

Quine thus claims that knowledge of what exists come from sense-data; and since he claims of all knowledge to be generated by sense-data, his theory of ontological commitment leads to skeptical solipsism. More precisely, in construing physical objects in terms of sense data Quine tries to show that what we know is not only legitimate but also empirically consistent. In this sense, his position in epistemology is a form of empiricism.

After all, Quine has also made a very important methodological claim on the ground that ontological commitment is analytical rather than speculative. Interestingly, what he believes in the being of fictional entities is similar to what Wyman calls 'unactualized possibles.'[14]

What Quine seems to arrive at when he is dealing with the problem of ontology, is that we must take predicates as applying to something; and again, to say that we use predicates that are regarded as being capable of affirming the existence of anything by which the predicate is satisfied.

In this connection, P.T. Geach[14] remarks that Quine's talking of object existing with the help of predicate being taken as applying to something is not convincing because predicates stand also for properties. If to say that a predicate applies to something is to say that objects exist, then it would not be incorrect to say that objects exist is to say that properties are instantiated. We can also say that properties are instantiated instead of saying that objects exists. Geach considers exists' as a second-level predicate.[16] Quine opposes this on the ground that what a predicate stands for something is necessarily not to imply that there are properties, as opposed to what instantiates them. On the contrary, if we say that properly is instantiated instead of saying that objects exist, then it would be said that some other property is instantiated,

namely, some property which this property instantiates. This brings out the fact that if a property Ø is instantiated it certainly does not follow that there is any thing that it instantiates. It seems to be clear that whenever we say that predicates apply to something if says simply that they had meaning. In the case of negative existential statements a predicate is actually asserted to be taken as applying to nothing. Quine contends that predicative expressions are meaningfully used.

Ayer, in the course of criticising Quine, also points out that if we talk of a predicate being taken as applying to something, we meet with the difficulty that all predicates that we use are not regarded as being capable of applying to anything. A formalist who does not admit number into ontology may accept that the expression 'being a prime number between 7 and 13 'has meaning but does not allow that there is something to which it applies. Then, how are we to distinguish between those predicates that are to be taken as applying to something and those that are not (excepting negative existential statements)? Quine gives answer to this question but not satisfactory one.

Despite being these difficulties in Quine's philosophy of ontological commitment, there are ten characteristics thereof. Firstly, he has given an importance of bound variables to the ontological issues because a picture of existence is constructed largely symbolic in that he admits the value of variables, variables of quantification and usage of just those entities encompassed by our use of 'everything', 'nothing', 'something' etc.

Secondly, from the fact that a sign that is demonstrative or pronoun in its nature has meaning, it does not follow èither that there is anything that it stand for, or that there is anything that it denotes. This does not apply only to words like 'green', which are commonly regarded standing for properties, but also to words like 'pegasus' which are regarded as names. What Quine tries to prove is that after we interrupt the noun 'Pegasus' in terms of Pegasizing as a description under Russell's theory of description, the old notion that pegasus can not be said not to be without presupposing that in some sense Pegasus is has been disposed of.

Thirdly, we can use both general and singular terms meaningfully without thereby committing ourselves to the existence of anything whatever. That to say, one can use both general and singular terms to make statements significant 'which are such that it does not follow from them, that anything exists.'

Fourthly, there is difference between meaning and naming even in the case of a singular term, which is genuinely a name of an object. In this connection, we can take Frege's example of the morning star and the evening star which shows that two expressions denote the same object but can not be regarded as having the same meaning, that is, they are not synonymous.

Fifthly, 'logically, a name is what refers to an object is purely existent. Now, in strict logical sense, what is purely existent is given in our experience. Obviously, names stand for sense data. Words like 'Pegasus', 'Unicorns' which we also take as names are known to exist through sense data.

Sixthly, the names to which Quine's method on the basis of Russell's theory of description directly applies are complex phrases or names. Such phrases are not analysed independently but only as the fragments of the whole sentence in which they occur.

Seventhly, from the fact that names and descriptive phrases should be distinguished, ordinarily, we think that descriptive phrases are for their objects in the same way as names. But this general conception has some difficulties. If 'Pegasus' which is used also as name is considered as standing for the 'winged horse', and the 'winged horse'which is a descriptive phrase is considered as standing from the name 'Pegasus', then an absurd knowledge would be found that 'Pegasus is Pegasus.' Therefore, names and descriptive phrases must be distinguished. Like Russell, Quine holds that the letter does not stand for an object but stands for certain characteristics, which we think apply to an object.

Eighthly, what Quine is concerned to prove is that when we are committed to an ontology by our use of bound variables it is simply admitting

abstract entities into our ontology. In this sense when we say that Pegasus is or that there are centaurs, we are admitting abstract entities into ontology or realms of being. In short, to say that one is committed to an ontology by our use of bound variables is indeed, his way of saying just that one affirms that there are abstract entities. Thus he accepts a language of mathematics containing variables of higher levels in formulating his logistic conception of ontological commitment.

Ninthly, Quine's account of ontological commitment, however, differs from Locke's theory of ontological commitment. Locke held that ontological commitment which is metaphysical in its nature is involved in the mind's taking cognizance of physical objects through certain qualities which depend upon the former but are the product of the latter. Quine, on the other hand, does not believe in the mind or body as physical objects or substances, which make contact with each other through sense data.

Tenthly, though his philosophy of ontological commitment lies in the tradition of Greek philosophy his method is different from that of Greek philosophy. Plato's method was largely metaphysical and introspective but Quine's method is scientific-oriented. It may be also added that Plato has made use of metaphysical knowledge in formulating his philosophy of ontological commitment, whereas Quine, having formulated theory of ontological commitment, has supplied scientific knowledge.

To conclude, we shall make two observations in the light of Quine's assertions. First, what we believe in the reality of particulars is based on sense data; and secondly; what we are affirming as a fact of some sort it may be described by choosing our conceptual schemes. As regards his first assertion, we may say that system of ontology would, for him, have to be consistent with the life of sense-experience, what is also called sense data, because knowledge of what exists comes from sense data. In this sense, his theory of ontological commitment is essentially existential. I think that the cornerstone of his ontology is his sharp distinction between essence and existence. Essence that is always universal and is free of time does not possess conversion or

changeability. Existence, on the other hand, that is particular and temporal possesses conversion and changeability.

As regards the second assertion, we may point out that the questions about ontology can be interpreted as questions about the choice of conceptual schemes, and since the adoption of an ontology is nothing but simply a matter of choosing a conceptual scheme, his (Quine's) ontology, it seems to me, is running under the line of pragmatic trend. According to me, throughout his theory of ontological commitment, he maintains the importance of logic therein. He asserts that there is no pre-logical understanding of ontological commitment. For this reason ontology and logic is said to be so much so related to each other that ontology without logic is empty and logic without ontology is blind.

Anyway, the great ancient discussion on ontology or realms of being has flared up anew in the philosophy of Quine. It is Quine who has developed Russellean view on ontological commitment in new order. Quine's approach to his criterion of ontological commitment is so much impressive and convincing that R. Carnap[17] also admits of the use of bound variables as referring to a certain kind of entities 'which is the aspect of our linguistic usage involving us in ontological commitments.' Quine seems to share with Heidegger[18] in the sense that he, like Headgear, identifies all philosophy with ontology and remarks in this connection that ontology and phenomenology are not two distinct philosophical disciplines among others.

NOTES

1.   W.V. Quine 'Notes on Existence and Necessity', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 40, 1943 Reprinted in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Leonard Linsky, the University of Illinois, London 1952.

2.   W.V. Quine, 'On What There Is' *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. II,No 5, 1948. Reprinted in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*, ed. Leonard Linsky, op.cit. P-189.

3.   *Ibid.*,

4.   See B. Russell, 'Descriptions', *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, Chap. XVI, Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1920. Reprinted in *Classics of Analytic Philosophy*,

ed., Robert R. Ammerman, McGraw - Hill Book Co., 1965; and in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language, op.cit.*

5.   W.V. Quine, 'On What There Is', op. cit P-200; and also his article, 'Designation and Existence', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 36, 1936, p-36. Reprinted in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Feigl and Sellars.

6.   W.V. Quine, 'On What There Is', *op.cit*, P-190

7.   *Ibid.*,

8.   *Ibid.*,

9.   W.V. Quine, 'Designation and Existence', op. cit. PP-31-32.

10.   *Ibid.*

11.   W.V. Quine, 'On What There Is',*op. Cit.* PP-204-205

12.   A.J.Ayer, *Philosophical Essays*, Macmillan and Co. Ltd., New York, 1965

13.   *Ibid*, P-222

14.   W.V. Quine, 'On What There Is', *op.cit.* PP-190-199.

15.   Vide P.T. Geach, 'On What There Is, *Supplementary Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Vol. XXV,

16.   *Ibid.*, PP-130-132.

17.   R. Carnap, Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology, *Revue Internationale de philosophie*, 11, 1950. Reprinted in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language, op.cit.*

18.   Vide, M. Heidegger, *Being and Time.*, tr. By John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York, 1962,