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Existence Without Possible Worlds

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1. Introduction

It is quite challenging to find a statement about which all philosophers agree, since one of the major methods of philosophizing is to doubt everything. Although his empiricism and naturalism are highly disputed, one statement by William Van Orman Quine would be acknowledged by almost all philosophers, most likely because it is about the general task of philosophy: “I think of philosophy as concerned with our knowledge of the world and the nature of the world.”¹

The disagreement begins when philosophers attempt to define the terms of this statement, especially when they try to find a definition of ‘world’: it can be used as a synonym for reality, sometimes in the narrow sense of physical reality – whatever ‘physical’ means (classically ‘experienceable’ or comprising objects that are studied by natural sciences) –, sometimes in a wider sense as a combination of physical and mental reality. The latter one can only be used as far as the existence of mental entities is at all accepted. Depending on the standpoint from which one looks at this concept, reality can be seen as the sum of either

¹ Magee, *The ideas of Quine: Dialogue with W.V. Quine*, 170.

all things (this would be a materialistic standpoint) or as the sum of *all facts* (this would be a ‘mental’ standpoint, because a fact or true statement is a mental entity). In his ‘Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus’ Ludwig Wittgenstein argued for the latter, saying that the world is everything that is the case – the sum of all facts.²

Quine argues for the former concept – reality as the sum of all things. Advancing philosophical *extensionalism*, he argues that universals are not more than classes, and that a class is not more than the sum of its members. Statements do not have an independent existence (namely the ‘thought’ – a mental entity expressed by the statement), but expressions merely have to be regarded as physical objects. Rejecting Frege’s distinction between meaning (as intensional) and reference (as extensional), Quine denies the existence of intensionality, with the consequence that the meaning of a sentence is inseparable from its reference to the physical world: The meaning of a sentence is the fact making it true or false; the meaning of name is the object(s) to which it refers; the meaning of a predicate is the property which is truthfully or wrongly assigned to an object.³

But what can be regarded as a thing, an object, an existing entity? In the following chapter I would like to analyze Quine’s usage of the term ‘existence’.

² C.f. Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, 1.1.

³ C.f. Morris, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language, 113.

2. Existence

“There are the ontological questions, as they might be called: general questions as to what sorts of things there are, as well as what it means to exist, for there to be something.”⁴

W.V. Quine

As pointed out, Philosophy is concerned with everything that exists, specifically within the sub area metaphysics or ontology. Originating from the Latin verb ‘ex-sistere’, a thing can be said to exist by ‘standing out’ or ‘appearing’ – very much connected to sensory experience. That does not necessarily mean that only the things we see exist. A radical empiricist would rather say that only those things we can *potentially* see or experience can be recognized as existing or non-existing objects. However, this view stands on shaky ground, since in modern physics one can no longer clearly distinguish between what can and cannot be experienced: Molecules, atoms, electrons, strings – these entities can only be indirectly observed, and the definition of what counts as an indirect observation highly depends on the physical theory the observer presupposes.

If one applies the methods of critical empiricism to ontology, every knowledge about the existence or non-existence of an object has to be regarded as preliminary, as it is the case for any hypothesis in natural science. Even if one observed a dragon oneself, the existence of dragons can be doubted, alleging that the observation has been a dream or that one lived in the Matrix. Non-existence is even harder to claim, since – similar to natural laws – one relies solely on the inductive method: I have

⁴ Magee, The ideas of Quine: Dialogue with W.V. Quine, 171.

never seen dragons, nobody I know has ever seen dragons, almost every part of this world has been explored and if somebody had ever found dragons, it would be very likely that this information somehow became public and I or somebody I know would have heard about it. Thus, it is very likely that dragons do not exist.

Kant's critique of the ontological argument triggered an ongoing discourse among philosophers about the nature of the predicate 'exists'. Usually opposing views are formulated using the question whether existence predicates are first-order predicates or not; a first-order predicate only takes individual entities as arguments and constitutes a definite subset. There are several arguments that favor existence as not a first-order predicate: (1) If it were, its negation would be a first-order predicate, too; it would be self-contradictory to talk about someone's non-existence, since forming a subset of non-existent human beings already requires a set of all existing human beings, of which the non-existing people would be a subset.⁵ (2) If 'exists' were a first-order predicate, it would be true of everything; therefore 'not exists' would be true of nothing – false of everything. No meaningful statement "... does not exist" could be formulated. (3) As Kant argued, existence does not add anything to an object or individual: "One hundred real talers do not contain the least more than a hundred imaginary talers."⁶ Intrinsic predicates define a concept, but it is independent from the fact as to whether the concept is currently actualized in this world. Thus, the existence of an object is separate from its essence.

⁵ C.f. Article 'existence' from May 24, 2002, in: Standord Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existence> (accessed on 1/26/10).

⁶ Kant, Immanuel: *Critique of Pure Reason*, II. Theil, II. Abth., II. Buch, III. Hauptst.

In order to avoid these problems, Gottlob Frege suggested treating 'to exist' as a secondary-order predicate. These do not quantify over individuals but over classes of individuals, namely first-order predicates. Then to speak about the existence of a concept means to acknowledge that the concept is instantiated at least once. "Dragons do not exist" therefore means that the concept of dragon is not actualized – at least not at this time in this world. The problem that arises here is that when talking about individual persons we usually do not regard them as instantiations of a certain concept. Using Quine's example, how could one say that Pegasus, Poseidon's flying horse, does not exist? The failure of applying a second-level existence predicate to individuals and the failure of applying a first-level existence predicate to concepts is the main reason why followers of Frege's view usually see existence as an equivocal concept, having two distinct meanings, one expressed when applying it to individuals, one when applying it to properties (kinds).

2.1 A Univocal Theory of Existence

Quine tries to give a clearer definition of existence. Similar to Frege and Russell, he did not accept an equivocal concept or two-sense theory of existence. How is this way tenable? The existence predicate must be only first- or only second-order. Because the problems of seeing it as a merely first-order predicate (like meaningfully claiming the non-existence of a thing) can only be avoided by introducing second-order existence, the only way to maintain a univocal theory of existence is to rule out first-order existence predicates. This has an enormous ontological

consequence: properties are now ontologically primitive – individuals are only the sum of their properties. Quine’s quotation defining extensionalism “[T]he universal is no more than the sum of its particulars”⁷ actually applies not only to concepts, but to what we recognize as individuals. It doesn’t mean that a human person is not any more than the sum of its physical parts, rather that our *reference* to a specific human person is not more than the sum of all properties we use to distinguish this person from the rest of the world. Individuality seems to be a non-primordial attribute: the assumption that a class of properties used to refer to an entity is so complex that it is only instantiated once.

Two major problems are created when eliminating first-order existence. The first one is the issue of individual life forms. Quine solves this quandary by reducing names to properties. “Socrates exists” is therefore an ordinary-language version of the sentence “There is an x such that x socratizes.” Socratizing is the sum of all known properties that can be applied to x , and by creating a name-property ‘to socratize’ we assume that there exists only one instantiation of this property, namely x . The second problem arises when talking about fictional characters. How is it possible to state meaningful sentences about fairytale characters when meaningfully referring to fairytale characters is not possible?

Quine had claimed that all proper names can be construed as definite descriptions. With ‘Designation and Existence’ (1939) he wrote an essay attempting to explain how one can deny the existence of Pegasus. His major argument is that one does not commit oneself to an ontology containing Pegasus when making the statement about Pegasus

⁷ Quine, *The Time of my life*, 32.

that it does not exist. Inspired by Russell, Quine proposed to translate proper names into description and define existence claims of singular terms as $\neg\exists x(Wx \wedge \forall y(Wy \rightarrow y = x))$. In this case, ‘Pegasus’ would have to be translated into a predicate that is definite enough to ensure that it can – if it exists – only be actualized once; Quine uses ‘the winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon’⁸. Acknowledging Pegasus’ existence is therefore a simplification of saying “There is at least one entity x such that it is a winged horse captured by Bellerophon and there is no entity y different from x that is a winged horse captured by Bellerophon. Likewise, denying Pegasus’ existence is a simplification of saying “For all existing entities x it is the case that x does not have the property of being the winged horse captured by Bellerophon (and if it were not the case, all other entities fulfilling this property would be identical to x)”.

The problem with the elimination of proper names is that the substituted descriptions are often not any more ‘basic’ than the original, since they again contain proper names that would have to be eliminated as well. This is well shown in Quine’s own example, in which the term ‘Pegasus’ is exchanged with a description containing the proper name ‘Bellerophon’. Being aware of these difficulties, Quine ceased to use Russell’s type theory to eliminate proper names in his later works.⁹ But he didn’t change his mind about exchanging proper names with descriptions, now substituting Pegasus with the description of *being-*

⁸ Quine, *On What There Is*, 7.

⁹ A good overview of the development of Quine’s attitude towards the description theory of names is given in Fara, Delia Graff: *Socratizing*, to be published. See <http://www.princeton.edu/~dfara/papers/soc.pdf>.

Pegasus which cannot be further analyzed.¹⁰ Hence, “Pegasus does not exist” is simply treated as “Nothing is Pegasus”¹¹: $\neg\exists x IsPegasus(x)$. By eliminating the first-order predicative use of existence in this way, Quine establishes a univocal theory of existence, limiting the meaning of existence to “what existential quantification expresses.”¹² Quine means “‘exists’ to cover all there is”¹³, but the question on what there is cannot be answered within an ontological theory.¹⁴ It makes sense to talk about the universe of a theory “only relative to some background theory”¹⁵ This ontological relativity has severe consequences for epistemology.

2.2 Ontological Commitment

Quine rejects the notion of epistemology as the search for a ‘first philosophy’ that can create an ontological foundation from which everything else can be deduced.¹⁶ Different ontologies should rather be treated similarly to scientific theories: Theories are provisional, they can be falsified by empirical evidence, they can be modified. But they cannot be compared ‘from the outside’; like Feyerabend’s and Kuhn’s

¹⁰ C.f. Quine, *Word and Object* §37.

¹¹ Quine usually writes “Nothing is-Pegasus” to emphasize that ‘is’ is used as a copula and Pegasus as a predicative noun.

¹² Quine, *Existence and Quantification*, 97.

¹³ *Ibid*, 100.

¹⁴ It can be raised but not answered. This leads to Quine’s view that theories are “not fully interpreted”, not “deductively closed sets”. C.f. Quine, *Ontological Relativity*, 51.

¹⁵ Quine, *Ontological Relativity*, 55.

¹⁶ Quine writes: “My position is a naturalistic one; I see philosophy (...) as continuous with science. (...) There is no external vantage point, no first philosophy”, in: Quine, *Natural Kinds*, 126f.

assumptions in philosophy of science – the incommensurability of theories –, Quine advances a view that there is no ‘vantage point’ that can be used to objectively compare theories and say one is (from an epistemological point of view) better than the other.¹⁷ This is what Quine calls *naturalized epistemology*:

“[There is no] vantage point outside the conceptual scheme that [the philosopher] takes in charge (...). He cannot study and revise the fundamental conceptual scheme of science and common sense without having some conceptual scheme, whether the same or another no less in need of philosophical scrutiny, in which to work. He can scrutinize and improve the system from within.”¹⁸

So how do we decide what ontology we should use? If there were no criterion upon which to argue in favor of a specific ontology, one would have to become a radical skeptic. This might be the reason why one of the major criticisms of Quine is that he is a relativist. But this accusation is unsubstantiated. Although naturalized epistemology gives up the quest for a theory of knowledge¹⁹, it is very concerned with the justification of an ontology, determining “one belief as firmer or more certain, [relative] to the believer’s mind”²⁰.

For Quine all language necessarily presupposes some ontological commitment: “Conceptualization on any considerable scale is

¹⁷ Quine calls this the underdetermination of theories. Any reference to an object is theory-dependent, and particular sentences can never be verified or falsified in isolation, since every theory can be modified to comply with unpredicted sensory data.

¹⁸ Quine, *Word and Object*, 275f.

¹⁹ “[T]he best we can do is give up the notion of knowledge as a bad job and make do rather with its separate ingredients”, in: Quine, *Quiddities*, 109.

²⁰ Quine, *Quiddities*, 109.

inseparable from language.”²¹ So how do we choose a certain language and with it an ontology? Well, we actually did not choose our language, but rather acquired it from our parents and the society we live in. In a naturalistic theory, language is a product of evolution: talking and referring to possible harms and telling stories about how to avoid life-threatening situations or how to treat illnesses gave people an advantage in natural selection. This means we speak a certain language for practical reasons; the ontology that we adapted with this language is therefore also a practical ontology. It includes simplifications, abstractions and postulated entities that simplify our sensory input more economically in order to transfer life-saving behavioral information from one generation to the next.

The most fundamental concept in our language is the notion of external objects, which is used as a basis to organize sensory data.²² “Physical objects are postulated entities which round out and simplify our account of the flux of experience, just as the introduction of irrational numbers simplifies laws of arithmetic.”²³ This does not mean that our notion of physical objects is objective, but that it is epistemologically foundational, because it is the basis of an ontology that every human language we know is – primarily for practical reasons – committed to.²⁴

²¹ Quine, *Word and Object*, 3.

²² “The concept of physical objects – this is not a concept in the language. To acquire it is to learn the language.” (Dilman, *Quine on ontology, necessity, and experience*, 29); “[O]ur ordinary language of physical things is about as basic as language gets.” (Quine, *Word and Object*, 3)

²³ Quine, *On What There Is*, 18.

²⁴ “Our talk of external things, our very notion of things, is just a conceptual apparatus that helps us to foresee and control the triggering of our sensory receptors in the light of previous triggering of our sensory receptor.” (Quine, *Things and Their Place in Theories*, 1)

Quine explains in 'On what there is' that the "physical conceptual scheme simplifies our account of experience because of the way myriad scattered sense events come to be associated with single so-called objects.". In 'Two dogmas of empiricism' he writes:

"The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience"²⁵

If a language guarantees the intelligibility of statements uttered in this particular language, every entity we can talk about is part of our ontology. That is true except if we were able to reformulate a sentence containing this object into another sentence that is more basic, which is Quine's method to avoid abstract terms and proper names within his ontology. Every object in a language that cannot be paraphrased is part of the speaker's ontology. Ilham Dilman formulates Quine's criterion of ontological commitment as following:

"An entity is presupposed by a theory if and only if it is needed among the values of the bound variables in order to make the statement affirmed in the theory true"²⁶

Existence ('presupposing an entity') therefore is theory-dependent and can, as a second-order predicate or quantifier, be applied to all entities which can be quantified over. Dilman continues:

"[W]hat a language guarantees is the intelligibility of statements made in that language, including existential statements made in it; and that means guarantees the possibility of their truth."²⁷

²⁵ Quine, Two dogmas of empiricism, 44.

²⁶ Dilman, Quine on ontology, necessity, and experience, 9.

²⁷ Ibid., 29.

If the notion of existence is based on the theory of physical objects, then what sense does it make to say that physical objects exist? To make this proposition meaningful, one must have a theory of existence outside the theory of physical objects. But according to Quine, this is not necessary: “Physical objects exist” can simply be paraphrased as “physical object propositions make sense and therefore can be true.”²⁸ Thus, by saying in ordinary language that something exists or does not exist, one does not automatically commit oneself to an ontology containing the object that is referred to. This is exactly how Quine solves the Pegasus issue:

We commit ourselves to an ontology containing Pegasus when we say Pegasus is. But we do not commit ourselves to an ontology containing Pegasus when we say that Pegasus ... is *not*.²⁹

As I have shown above, to deny Pegasus’ existence means claiming that the property *Is-Pegasus* is not actualized at this time. Since Quine does not accept mental entities, we cannot see this property as an entity itself, but rather we have to see it as a counterpart to a specific neurological pattern in our brain which is formed by cultural influence (books and movies about Greek mythology) and which would cause us to regard “Pegasus exists” as a true statement as soon as sensory data is interpreted as fulfilling this specific pattern. By this example one can see why Quine’s theory of reference is often associated with behaviorism.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Quine, On what there is, 8.

2.3 Abstract Entities

According to Quine, most abstract entities can be paraphrased into sentences that only contain descriptive terms. Accordingly, substantiated properties are not treated as abstract universals, but in a behaviorist way, meaning that for example ‘redness’ is not an entity, but to associate the property *Is-Red* to some objects but not to others is a conditioned behavior, originating in the basic experience of similarity within one’s sensory input and in the adaptation of cultural norms.

But for Quine the non-existence of abstract entities is not a dogma, as it is in classical nominalism. He is at the same time a naturalist and fallibilist, so he does not believe in “any evidence, any avenue to truth higher than or more fundamental than ordinary scientific method itself”³⁰ and he “recognizes that science changes over time and that someday science could conceivably withdraw its support for physicalism and/or empiricism.”³¹ Thus, every entity that is indispensable for our scientific practice needs to be included into one’s ontological commitments. ‘To exist’ does not mean ‘occupies a spatio-temporal region’.³² Today this implies: Since mathematics is as indispensable for science as the notion of physical objects³³, and all of mathematics including numbers can be reduced to set theory, Quine acknowledges the existence of sets – which are abstract non-mental entities – as stated in an interview:

³⁰ Bergstrom / Føllesdal, Interview with Willard Van Orman Quine, 196.

³¹ Gibson, Willard Van Orman Quine, 9.

³² C.f. Quine, *On what there is*, 2f.

³³ Maybe the notion of physical objects is actually not indispensable, for contemporary quantum mechanics reduces objects to mathematically described fields.

“(...) but you do believe in the existence of certain abstract non-mental entities.” – “Yes, numbers notably. (...) Assuming sets, or classes, is on an equal footing with assuming molecules, atoms, electrons, neutrons, and the rest; all these are objects, concrete and abstract, that are assumed by the network of hypotheses by which we predict and explain our observations of nature.”³⁴

In the same interview, Quine summarizes his ontological commitments:

“I hold that physical objects are real, and exist externally and independently of us. I don’t hold that there are only these physical objects. There are also abstract objects: objects of mathematics that seem to be needed to fill out the system of the world. But I don’t recognize the existence of minds, of mental entities, in any sense other than as attributes or activities on the part of physical objects, mainly persons.”³⁵

2.4 Comparing Theories

How can one theory of reality be determined to be better than another? What makes it rational to commit one’s ontology to the existence of certain entities and to deny the existence of others? Quine showed that there are some entities that everybody is committed to – simply by using language. These include physical objects, sets, and maybe even some properties of physical objects like space, time and causality (similar to Kant’s ‘a priori’ judgments). But what makes Quine prefer conceptualism over Platonism, physicalism over Cartesian dualism, empiricism over rationalism?

³⁴ Magee, *The ideas of Quine: Dialogue with W.V. Quine*, 175.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

For an empiricist, rationality is not objective, but consists in a set of rules that one learns as a foundation of one's language and thinking. 'Our' rationality is often split up into the criteria consistency, coherency and parsimony. *Logical consistency* is a fundamental part of language; logical rules define how sentences have to be structured, and are – according to Quine – not objective and necessary truths (analytical) but relative to one's language. *Coherency* usually means compliance of the model's implications with sensory inputs and other accepted models. According to Karl Popper, a theory is valid as long as it is not disproved by experiment. However, particular sentences can never be verified or falsified in isolation, since every theory can be modified to comply with unpredicted sensory data (Duhem-Quine-Thesis). Thus, neither consistency nor coherency are sufficient as clear principles of rationality. The *principle of parsimony* states that – out of two incoherent but consistent theories both having equal strength of explanation and prediction – it is rational to accept the one with less ontological assumptions and irrational to accept the other.

Equating the methods of natural science and the rules of rationality that are applied to ontological commitment, Quine uses both the 'aesthetic' rule of ontological parsimony and the rule of minimizing brute facts. His major argument against Platonism is, therefore, that accepting the existence of universals suggests a rather great amount of ontological entities, although many of them are avoidable without causing a loss of explanatory value. "[The Platonist's] over-populated universe is in many ways unlovely. (...) [Its] slum of possibles is a

breeding ground for disorderly elements.”³⁶ Quine proposes that we should “limit modalities to whole statements”³⁷. The words ‘possible’ and ‘necessary’ should therefore be used rather as an adverb than as an adjective: Instead of saying “There is a possible entity Pegasus” we should claim “Possibly, Pegasus exists” or, more exactly, “Possibly, there is an x that pegasizes.” When we speak of possibility, we speak about our own ignorance of the truth-value of a certain proposition, but not about any object.

Here we see that through changing ordinary language into a special grammatical form, Quine introduces a way to reduce language to an ontology that doesn’t contain possible entities. Likewise, Quine rejects possibly but not actually existing objects (‘Meinongian objects’) as well as any other kind of *mental entities* like meanings or propositions.

2.5 Critique

According to Quine’s extensionalism, the meaning of a sentence is the fact that it makes it true or false, opposing Frege’s distinction between sense (*Sinn* or meaning) and reference (*Bedeutung*). But I do not think this distinction can be easily eliminated. To use Frege’s example, the sentences “The morning star is Venus” and “The evening star is Venus” are made true by the same fact, namely the planets Venus and Earth being in a constellation so that Venus appears as a bright star every

³⁶ Quine: On what there is, 4.

³⁷ Ibid. See also Quine, Three Grades of Modal Involvement, 176: “necessity resides in the way in which we say things, and not in the things we talk about.”

evening and every morning. But the meaning of these sentences is different: I can imagine a possible world in which the references of ‘morning star’ and ‘evening star’ are not identical.

Especially intensional contexts create problems for Quine’s extensionalism; these contexts are constituted by the use of modal expressions (as in ‘it is necessary that x ’) and propositional attitudes (as in ‘to believe that p ’, ‘to hope that p ’, ‘to know that p ’ or ‘to wish that p ’). If one accepted quantification over propositional attitudes, one would have to accept mental entities. Denying the existence of such purely mental states, Quine does not allow quantification over them, drawing off any meaningfulness from propositional attitudes. This is what Quine calls *referential opacity* (*opaqueness*), as opposed to *referential transparency*.³⁸ A “referential opaque context is one that cannot be *quantified into* (with quantifier outside the context and variable inside).”³⁹ As a result, the words within an intensional context no longer refer to their original referents.

In his paper from 1956 ‘Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes’, Quine defined the distinction between notional and relational senses of ‘believes’,⁴⁰ now commonly referred to as ‘de re’ and ‘de dicto’ believes. Accordingly, the following sentences are not identical: “There is an x such that Ralph believes x is a spy.” and “Ralph believes that ‘There exists an x such that x is a spy.’” Quine rejects the first use, claiming that “quantifying into a propositional idiom from outside ... [is] a dubious

³⁸ C.f. Quine, *Word and Object*, 141-151.

³⁹ Quine, *Three Grades of Modal Involvement*, 174.

⁴⁰ C.f. Quine, *Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes*, 186.

business"⁴¹, because their formal treatment leads to contradictions. But it is problematic to reduce the first sentence to the second, because they don't have the same meaning. Quantification into intensional contexts appears meaningful to us; when I say "I believe Ralph to be a spy", I also believe that 'Ralph' and 'spy' are not confined into a referentially opaque context, but that they have the same referential meaning as when I say "Ralph is a spy".

Quine seems to be quite the opposite of an ordinary-language philosopher. If there are sentences that 'ordinary people', maybe even the majority of philosophers, claim to be meaningful, he would say "No, you actually mean something different. What you suppose to mean cannot be logically formulated without contradictions, so your intuition must be wrong."

⁴¹ Ibid., 187.

3. Alternatives

3.1 Meinongianism and Parsimony

In ‘On what there is’, Quine leads a fictitious dialogue with a philosopher called Wyman. Wyman advances Meinongianism, a non-univocal theory of existence. According to Alexius Meinong’s⁴² theory, things can either exist (*existieren*), subsist (*bestehen*) or absist (*gegeben sein*).⁴³ Existence denotes the spatio-temporal being of an object; subsistence, on the other hand, is a state of possible existence, as held by unicorns, flying elephants, or mathematical theories. Absistence is an ontological state that is taken by logically inconsistent objects like round squares; however, these are still considered objects since we are able to talk about them.

The distinction between metaphysical or logical existence and physical existence is not uncommon in contemporary ontology, for example used by Edward N. Zalta.⁴⁴ Quine’s critique of Meinongianism and related theories includes the dubious ontological state of possibilities (“No entity without identity”), the fact that self-contradicting concepts cannot be meaningfully talked about, as well as the ontological profligacy (non-parsimony) of this theory.

Parsimony, in turn, cannot be seen as the top distinctive criterion when comparing theories. Ontological parsimony, according to William

⁴² Meinong was an Austrian philosopher, living from 1853 to 1920, pupil of Franz Brentano, who was a teacher of Edmund Husserl and emphasized intentionality in ontological and epistemological theories.

⁴³ C.f. Meinong, Alexius: *Über Möglichkeit und Wahrscheinlichkeit*, 1915.

⁴⁴ Zalta, E., *Intensional Logic and the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge, 1988. See also Zalta’s web page <http://mally.stanford.edu/zalta.html>.

of Ockham, is only a distinctive criterion when comparing two theories of equal explanatory power: entities should not be multiplied *unnecessarily*. Thus, if it were possible to reduce all thinking processes to physical (neurological) processes, as supposed by Quine, mental entities would not be necessary and could therefore be eliminated from our ontology.

But as the example of quantification over propositional attitudes showed, an ontological theory does not maintain its full explanatory power after eliminating intensions and mental states. This is why the criterion of parsimony does not apply here. However, the dubious ontological state of possibilia is a sincere argument. Why do unicorns or flying elephants have to have a certain kind of existence? Why do sets or numbers? Why is it not possible to simply regard them as ideas, as creations of the human mind? Quine himself gives a partial answer to this question in ‘On what there is’:

“We may for the sake of argument concede that there is an entity, and even a unique entity (...) which is the mental Pegasus-idea; but this mental entity is not what people are talking about when they deny Pegasus.”⁴⁵

If words only refer to concepts in our mind, there is no relation between the concept and the external object it supposedly refers to. Quine solves this problem using his extensionalism, according to which ideas of objects are not more than the sum of the ideas of all the objects’ predicates. But, as showed, this conception seems to fail when one talks about propositions within intensional contexts.

⁴⁵ Quine, On what there is, 2.

When one claims a proposition to be a necessary or possible truth, they do not always, as Quine suggests, acknowledge to be referring to the level of certitude of their knowledge. When one expresses a hope or fear, they imagine a possible world which is not referentially opaque, but their concepts refer to objects within certain possible worlds as well as to objects in present-day reality.

A univocal theory of existence calls for a high price: the negation of the existence of mental entities and the referential opaqueness of propositions in intensional contexts. This is why I am quite skeptical of such a univocal theory. In the following, I would like to propose an alternative approach to solve the dilemma of existence.

3.2 Own Conception

If concepts are only in our head – as presupposed by any form of conceptualism –, then they are not definite, but rather blurry at their edges. Wittgenstein, for instance, showed this using the theory of family resemblance. I claim that establishing concepts in our mind requires the thought of possible worlds from the moment they are created. Thinking only works using modalities.

Concepts are open sets in two ways: They are open because we do not know yet how many objects are contained in the set. They are also open because we do not even know the specific meaning of our concepts. A concept can be narrowed / reduced by adding another distinctive property, or it can be extended by taking away one non-distinctive property from its meaning. When we create or learn a concept, we co-

create a large number of possible extensions. When we see a flying elephant, we can either narrow the original concept to non-flying elephant-like looking creatures, or we can extend the concept elephant so that it also covers the flying ones.⁴⁶ We do not have a problem with this, because already now, when we think of elephants, we can think of all kinds of possible worlds where some extended concepts are actualized. This is how many fairytales were created.

We do not only think of possible worlds, we rate them according to chances that they might be real, now or in the future. For instance, we regard the existence of flying elephants as quite unlikely. This is because it is difficult to imagine how flying elephants could be compatible with our other beliefs about the world, namely widely acknowledged physical theories. On the other hand, white elephants, although we might have never seen one, are thought to be more likely to exist.

Quine thinks that when we state *modal sentences*, like “It is possible that elephants fly”, we do not talk about possible objects. Rather, by saying that something has possible existence, we acknowledge our own ignorance. That might sometimes be true. But a constituting issue for most of our concepts are their origin and purpose, things that the entity can possibly do or what can possibly be done with it. When we think of an elephant, we think of watching them in zoos, elephant mothers looking after their children, us riding on them in the desert, using their tusks to produce piano keys, crossing the Alps with them to combat Rome and so on. The argument is that the notion of

⁴⁶ This conception is in my judgment compatible with many of the points Quine makes for the indeterminacy of translation. Quine says that nobody knows if a translation of a word comprises an equal concept or a narrower or extended one. I go even further by saying that this is not even known by the speaker himself.

possibility is even prior to concepts, since thinking of possible worlds is a constituting method for concepts.

3.3 Conclusion

Quine's method of philosophy is quite appealing. His thinking is more epistemological than ontological, because he tries to see ontological positions as theories that can be argued for or argued against. The type of evidence applied towards reasoning about ontological theories is not any different from reasoning about natural science, mathematics or logic.

“I see natural science as continuous with the mathematics that it uses, just as I see all this as continuous with philosophy. It all goes to make up our inclusive system of the world.”⁴⁷

With this in mind, empiricism seems to be rather a method than an ontological position for Quine. In his famous paper ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ he presents two never questioned principles of empiricism, namely reductionism and the analytic-synthetic distinction. If naïve empiricism is set as an ontological position, it results in positivism – that all talk about metaphysics is meaningless. But as a method, Quine's empiricism demands that the philosopher see the study of the world and how it really is as one big task comprised of philosophy, mathematics and natural sciences. Quine sees all these approaches using the same principles of reasoning, objecting to any ‘first principle’, ‘analytic

⁴⁷ Magee, *The Ideas of Quine: Dialogue with W.V. Quine*, 175. See also Quine, *Natural Kinds*, 126f.

statement’ or ‘fact with indubitable certainty’. There is no knowledge, only beliefs; and all beliefs are thoroughly “pragmatic”.⁴⁸

Based on such a pragmatic ontology, the existence of possible worlds and mental entities is rejected by Quine not because they cannot be experienced or seen (if that was the case, the existence of sets would have to be denied, too). Rather they are rejected because one of the principles of reasoning, ontological parsimony, demands this rejection – provided that the world can be explained equally well without assuming these entities as can be done with them.

The fundamental use of modalities in basic thinking makes Quine’s rejection of modalities highly disputable. Eliminating all kinds of modalities and mental entities, the explanatory power of an ontological system is reduced, and therefore more and more ‘brute facts’ must be implemented. This is why the rule of parsimony cannot be used to compare such ontological theories.

⁴⁸ C.f. Quine, Two dogmas of empiricism, 46.

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