Third Prize

Are there any non-existent things?

By Evgenia O'Connor

INTRODUCTION

We typically rely on experience or scientific evidence to answer the question "what exists?": our own observations of the moon and scientific studies of the planet Neptune convince us that both are existing physical objects. According to Gottlob Frege (1892), the existence of physical objects is what gives meaning to names such as "The Moon" or "The Planet Neptune" (Frege, 1982). Yet Frege noticed that we can also talk meaningfully about entities such as Heracles or the number 7, even though they do not correspond to physical entities. Frege attributed the meaningfulness of such names to the ontological existence of "semantic contents". I will elaborate further on Frege's account of meaningfulness, and will argue against Frege that ontological existence should be limited to existence in spacetime.

THE ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEM "WHAT IS THERE"

Alexius Meinong (1904) argued that denying the existence of certain entities indicates that they exist in *some* sense. By saying that unicorns do not exist we merely recognise their *physical* nonexistence, yet by doing so we also acknowledge their *existence*, or else how can we talk about them? Moreover, entities with disputed existence can be described in detail: Heracles is a mighty hero; 7 is a prime number. Their possession of properties, according to Meinong, is *independent* of their physical nonexistence; it allows us to assert truths or falsities about them: we can confirm that "Heracles is the son of Zeus" is true, and that "7 is greater than 6" is also true. If they had no being, argues Meinong, we would not be able to distinguish between truths and falsities about them (Meinong 1904: 20).

Meinong accepts a variety of entities – fictional, imagined, possible - as having a being: if Pegasus has a being, the nonbeing of Pegasus also has a being, since we can talk about it meaningfully too.

W.V.O. Quine (1948), in the chapter "On What There Is", describes Meinong's ontology as a "jungle" and examines which entities can reasonably be accepted as existing. He engages with an imaginary opponent, McX, who, like Meinong, argues that it is impossible to attribute anything to an entity which isn't there: Heracles must have some kind of being if we are able to attribute to him anything at all. Quine's move is to acknowledge this ambiguity: entities do not have to have a physical existence in order to exist in the form of *ideas* – or mental objects – in people's minds. What Quine is denying is not that ideas of Heracles or Pegasus exist, but that ontological entities corresponding to the ideas of Heracles or Pegasus exist, such as an *actual* mighty hero or an *actual* winged horse. Yet ideas cannot be defended as "existing" things. Asserting truths or falsehoods about mental object cannot be used as "markers" for their ontological existence, even if they have names and properties which can be described.

Quine also engages with a second imaginary opponent, Wyman, who argues that nonphysical entities are “unactualized possibilities”: while winged horses may not exist, there is no logical reason to deny the possibility of a winged horse existing in principle. While attributions of “actuality” may be limited to physical entities such as trees or benches, the fact that we cannot attribute “actuality” to Heracles or Pegasus is no more problematic, Wyman argues, than our inability to attribute “redness” to bananas. Quine, however, rejects “possibilia” as ontological entities by introducing a contradictory entity: “a round square cupola”: since nothing can be both round and square at the same time, we now have a *logical* reason to deny the existence of such an entity, since it can never be actualised. Quine’s opponent, however, is not ready to admit defeat: logically impossible entities such as “round squares” are simply meaningless (Quine, 1948).

MEANINGFUL VERSUS REFERRING TO AN EXISTING ENTITY

Wyman’s move compels us to examine the connection between the notion of “meaningfulness” and ontological existence: invoking meaningfulness in the existence debate could result from an assumption that for ontological talk to be meaningful words and names must refer to ontologically existing entities. But is this assumption justified?

A philosopher who looked into the problem of meaningfulness is Gottlob Frege. In his paper “Sense and Reference” (1892) he argued that names can have not only a “referent” – a physical entity to which a name is said to refer – but also semantic content, which he calls “sense” (Frege, 1892). According to Frege, names do not have to have a spatiotemporal referent in order to have “sense”: fictional characters such as “Pegasus” can be meaningful in virtue of descriptions of a winged horse. The name “Pegasus”, according to Frege, has “sense” and is meaningful despite the absence of a physical counterpart (Frege, 1892).

Quine makes use of an account by Bertrand Russell closely related to Frege’s, to argue that even though fictional characters -- such as Pegasus and Heracles – can be meaningful in virtue of descriptions attached to them, the semantic content of a name should not be confused with the *ontological* nonexistence of its referent (Quine, 1948).

ONE EXISTENCE, TWO FORMS OF BEING

Following Quine, it is possible to argue that fictional characters are mental entities with *purely* mental being – they have been invented by minds and exist as ideas, but lack ontological existence. Such view is compatible with empiricism which allows only two forms of being: (1) physical (spatiotemporal) and (2) mental. While physical entities can exist independently of human minds, fictional entities cannot, since their being is *entirely* dependent on minds: if minds cease to exist, so will fictional characters. This view can be described as a binary classification of being – spatiotemporal vs mental. The two forms of being may have some similarities, but the differences between them are fundamental: only entities with spatiotemporal dimensions can be said to have ontological existence.

But even if the existence of fictional entities is unproblematic, the debate about the existence of abstract entities is ongoing. There is a widespread view that abstract objects – such as mathematical entities – exist outside spacetime and are not invented but *discovered* by minds. On this view, the number 7 has nonphysical existence *independent* of our minds and the symbols we use to represent it. This argument, known as Platonism, challenges the binary account of being – spatiotemporal vs mental. If Platonism is true, we would have to allow a *third* mode of being, independent of spacetime *and* minds.

CARNAP'S EMPIRICAL-THEORETICAL DISTINCTION

To say more about the existence of mathematical entities, we must first consider their nature: they are widely understood as *theoretical* entities. A philosopher who outlined the empirical-theoretical distinction concerning the existence of entities was Rudolf Carnap. In his 1950 paper "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" he argued that when new entities are posited, new ways of speaking about them are also introduced, often subject to *new rules*. Carnap distinguishes two kinds of questions concerning existence: (i) internal, concerning the existence of entities within the framework, and (ii) external, concerning their ontological existence. Internal questions, according to Carnap, can be answered in accordance with *rules* of the framework itself: all entities complying with these rules can be recognised as "existing" within the framework. Such "reality", however, is *not* ontological, in Carnap's view, since ontological existence is *external* to the framework: it is directed at the *correspondence* between elements of the framework and external reality. Yet the *meaning* of the forms of expression used in questions such as "Do numbers exist?" is, according to Carnap, confined *within* the framework, which makes them *internal* questions with *trivial* answers. Presented as "external" questions, they are simply *meaningless* (Carnap, 1950).

This brings us back to Frege's account of meaningfulness and his distinction between "sense" and "referent" (1892). Applying his distinction to mathematical entities demonstrates that they do not require ontological existence outside minds in order to be meaningful, since mathematical "sense" can be derived purely from descriptions. Number 2, for instance, is described as "the number we get from adding 1 to 1", number 3 is described as "the number we get from adding 1 to 2", and so on. Such descriptions can be purely semantic content, yet – as Quine argued – semantic contents are not reliable markers for the ontological existence of referents (Quine, 1948).

CONCLUSION

Theoretical frameworks emerging from descriptions can be semantic content, since, according to Carnap, new ways of speaking – including new theoretical descriptions – can introduce new rules (Carnap, 1950). Since theoretical frameworks are "systems of rules", the empiricist can resolve the meaningfulness of mathematical entities and rules as purely "mental" entities, on the binary account of being. By contrast, arguments for Platonic existence outside spacetime *and* outside minds posit an *additional* ontological realm. Not only is the burden of proof for the existence of such a

realm on those who posit it; its existence should be rejected using Occam's razor, which states that new ontological entities should not be introduced unless necessary. And since the meaningfulness of mathematical entities and rules can be explained without positing an additional ontological realm, no such necessity exists.

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