QUINE ON ONTOLOGY AND NON-EXISTENTIAL ENTITIES: AN ANALYSIS

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1. Introduction

―Ontology is one of the crucial branches of philosophy that deals with the study of existence. It is used in the study of the existential status of reality. It, therefore, is the study of the question of what sorts of things or objects exist. The philosophers who came to study ontology did not share a common view in this regard. There are various views or opinions about ontology among the philosophers from the ancient to the contemporary period. The basic ontological question is ―what is there? (Quine, 1948, p. 21). And this is the fundamental problem of ontology. The answer to this fundamental ontological question/problem [―what is there?] has been found in various ways. Some philosophers say that matter is an ultimate reality; some others say that ultimate reality cannot be a matter but mental ideas/abstract ideas, (e.g., Plato's ideas or universals), etc. W.V.O. Quine, an American philosopher, belongs to the 20th century analytic philosophy. He also comes to study ontology. But he shares his view regarding ontology in a novel way. The essay ―On What There Is‖ is one of the famous writings of Quine in which he develops his idea of ontology elaborately. With careful examination of this essay, I am developing this present paper.

We have mentioned that ―what is there? or ―what does exist there? is the fundamental question/problem of ontology. Quine agreed with this question but answered in a different way. The major problem will arise when we talk about the negative aspect of this fundamental question, that is, ―what is not there? or ―what does not exist? By the negative aspect of the fundamental question, we mean to say that the entities those do not really exist.

―Pegasus, ―Unicorn, etc. are examples of those non-existential entities; they are just fictitious objects or entities. I, specifically, shall attempt to study the ontological status of non-existential entities. More precisely, in this paper, I am going to understand Quine's notion of ontology and how he deals with the non-existential entities regarding the issue of ontological status.

To solve these problems, I am dividing this paper into four sections, including this introduction. In the second section, I shall try to explain the background or canvas of Quine's notion of ontology. Quine explains his idea of ontology within the frame-work of naturalism and develops it with the ―ontological commitment (Quine, 1948, p.28). In the third section, I shall attempt to deal with the ontological commitment and its criterion. Based on ontological commitment, Quine says that whatever we say, we commit in language to some ontology. In this connection, I shall also try to explain here about the ontological status of fictitious or non-existent entities. Finally, I shall draw a significant conclusion.

2. The Canvas of Quine's Ontology

I am starting this section with the study of how Quine deals with the fundamental ontological problem, ―what there is? This problem can be paraphrased as ―what sorts of things or entities really exist? His approach to dealing with the ontological problem is not like the traditional view. That is, he deals with the ontological problem in a novel way. Here, the novelty is that his study of ontology is neither metaphysical nor epistemological nor transcendental. Rather, his notion of ontology is concerned with naturalism. Here, the questions ―what naturalism is‖ and ―how his idea of naturalism is related to ontology‖ are very significant. In response to these questions, I can take Quine's formulation of naturalism as, ―…naturalism: the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior to philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described‖ (Quine, Things and Their Place in Theories, 1981, p. 21). That is, there is no reality outside nature (or natural science). In this context, for example, there is no ―God, abstract entities in a Platonic realm beyond space and time, Cartesian soul- substance‖ (Glock, 2003, p. 27) because they do not belong to nature. It says that whatever there is, is naturalistic and physicalistic. Hence, since Quine, as a naturalist, does not accept entities beyond nature, his study of ontology is naturalistic. In this connection, I want to mention one more thing is that there is a close relationship between ontology and language. Regarding this relationship, in Word and Object, Quine takes a quotation from thinker James Grier Miller's writing in the following way: ―Ontological recapitulates philology (Quine W. V., 1960, p. Title page).1 We know that philology is the investigation of language, and I shall explain the relationship between ontology and language later. Since ontology and language are closely related, we have to know whether language is an abstract entity or a naturalistic entity. According to Quine, language is not an abstract entity but is naturalistic. As a reason, Quine says, ―language is a social art (Quine, 1960, p. xxix). That is, language is understood as a social phenomenon, and this is why it is public. It proves that language is a naturalistic phenomenon that belongs to space and time.`

Now, I am going to understand how Quine takes the fundamental question/problem–

―what is there? In order to explain it, we have to explain his ―ontological commitment, because it is the key concept of ontology by which Quine explains his notion of ontology. By ontological commitment, Quine does not simply mean to say ―what entity (or entities) a given theory says there is, but also it aims to find ―what entities a theory is committed to. In this context, the ontological problem ―what there is‖ may be identified with the problem ―what we are ontologically committed to,‖ but not with the problem ―which ontology we should to choose. In this context, Quine differs from Rudolf Carnap because Carnap does not accept Quine's notion of ontological commitment, and unlike Quine, he prefers the matter of choice of language.2 However, for Quine, we may say that ―the strategy for answering the question what is there? consists in asking what the scientific theories to which we subscribe are ontologically committed to‖ (Ghosh, 2013, p. 25).

Thus, ontological commitment plays a crucial role in understanding Quine's ontology. And the ontological commitment can be understood in relation to the role of language. In this context, Quine says:

> ―We commit ourselves outright to an ontology containing numbers when we say there are prime numbers between 1000 and 1010; we commit ourselves to an ontology containing centaurs when we say there are centaurs; and we commit ourselves to an ontology containing Pegasus when we say Pegasus is. But we do not commit ourselves to an ontology containing Pegasus or the author of Waverly or the round square copula on Berkeley College when we say that Pegasus or the author of Waverly or the copula in question is not. (Quine, 1948, p. 28)

It clears that it is possible to ―deny the existence of Pegasus or the author of Waverly without contradiction‖ (Ghosh, 2013, p. 25). It also tells us, Quine's view of ontological commitment depends on what we say in language. What we commit in our language is to have some ontology. In this connection, one important thing needs to be clarified: how language and theory are related. Quine opines that theories mean theory formulations.3 He says, ―A theory formulation is said to simply a sentence or typically a conjunctive sentence comprising the so-called axioms of theory‖ (Quine, 1975, p. 318). That is, a theory formulation is nothing but a sentence or a collection of sentences used to describe a certain phenomenon. It can also be said that a theory is ―nothing but a well-defined language‖ (Ghosh, 2013, p.38). Let's go back to explain the ontological commitment. To clarify Quine's ontological commitment clearly, we have to understand its criterion. Let's try to understand his ―criterion of ontological commitment.

3. Ontological Commitment and Its Criterion

As we have understood, to deal with the problem ―what there is? Quine applies the ontological commitment. He presents a standard or a criterion of ontological commitment in his well-known essay ―On What There Is.‖ It aims not only to search ―what entities a given theory says there is; its aim is also to find out ―what entities a theory committed to. Quine introduces the criterion of ontological commitment through the idea of quantification. The criterion says, ―To be is to be the value of a variable‖ (Quine, 1948, p. 34). Here, Quine says, a variable means a bound variable, and then the criterion can be write as ―to be is to be the value of a bound variable. 4 It aims to deal with the question, ―what a theory tells us what there is?

The question is, what does Quine mean by a bound variable? Reference bearers are bound variables that belong to the subject-place of a sentence, whereas predicates do not refer to/name anything but meaningful. A predicate is commonly a syncategorematic expression that does not refer to/name anything. Quine in ―A Logistical Approach to Ontological Problem explains the idea of name (or categorematic expression) and syncategorematic expression based on the contemporary sense, against the traditional view. In the contemporary sense, an expression is syncategorematic, for only the expression does not designate independently, but whether it belongs to the subject or to the predicate does not matter. The sentence, for example, ―Plato is wise‖ ―here the expression ―is wise‖ is syncategorematic because ―it does not designate anything independently though it belongs to the predicate of a categorical proposition. On the other hand, in the traditional sense, the predicate ―is wise‖ or ―wise‖ whatever is not considered a syncategorematic expression, just because it is a predicate of a sentence (or a categorical proposition). It is true that, like the traditional view, Quine accepts that syncategorematic expression cannot refer to or designate anything. They differ in the sense that for the traditional view, the terms (both ―subject and predicate of a categorical proposition) are non-syncategorematic (i.e., they are categorematic), and they have meaning independently. However, a syncategorematic expression ―can be part of a categorical proposition when used along with a categorematic term (Ghosh, 2013, p. 33). Hence, ―all, ―some, etc. are the examples of syncategorematic expression. On the other hand, Quine does not classify syncategorematic expressions on the basis of the subject-predicate of a sentence, but he says an expression is syncategorematic just because it does not designate independently.

The criterion of ontological commitment is concerned with quantified variables but not with constants. As a reason, it can be said that —constants‖ are known as syncategorematic sings, and so they, in isolation designate or name nothing. Moreover, for Quine, we cannot deny the possibility that —in some language there are no genuine names at all (Ghosh, 2013, p.35). As he has demonstrated that if descriptions are used instead of proper names, the use of proper names is completely unnecessary, which is also reducible using Russell's approach. For example, we can take —the only x that Pegasizes as a replacement for Pegasus. The meaning of —to Pegasize can be akin to —the winged horse that was captured by Bellerophon‖ (Quine, 1948, p. 27).

In predicate calculus of a language, quantification can use either —only to individual variables‖ or also —predicate variables. According to the first case, the variables' value range is occupied only by individuals and then it is nominalistic. The next case talks about universal that are abstract entities under which various individuals belong, and so it is a form of Platonism. —Analogous to —Pegasus‖ (the non-denoting names/apparent names) in a language, Quine moves from names to quantified variables as the medium of objective reference.5 To eliminate such names (i.e., apparent names), Quine says that it is more secure to state that variables serve as means (or vehicle) of reference rather than names. He also says that we are able to create a language in which all names could be replaced with descriptions, and eventually with bound variables. This is why; Quine gives emphasis on —to be is to be the value of a bound variable‖ instead of —to be is to be the designatum of a name. It asserts that —only what a scientific discourse or a theory says there is.‖ In this case, the role of language is very significant. Our ontological acceptance of anything is based on —what we say or tell to be existence in the world.

In this connection, the problem of ontology can be observed with the idea of —identity.6 Quine formulates it as follows: —there is no entity without identity. It says that entities should only be admitted if adequate identity standards or criteria can be met. It is known as —criterion of ontological admissibility. It can also be said, —Since there is no entity without identity, no reification without individuation‖ (Gaudet, 2006, p. 64). It is closely connected to the criterion of ontological commitment because it depends on —the identification of particulars/individuals. Quine as a naturalist (or a scientific empiricist) refutes the existence of universals on the basis of —the bound variables.‖ According to it, when we talk about —some horses are white‖ we imply —there are something that are horses and also are white. This statement is true because there are some white horses among the things that the bound variables —something‖ ranges across. But horsehood or whiteness are not possible to be —the value of a propositional function‖ because they are dependent objects. So, Quine denies the existence of universals.

However, Quine's ontological commitment is dependent on ―the identification of particulars. So, he says that to decide which ontological commitment to admit and how to apply it, we need to be explicit about how we evaluate Quine's ontological commitments in relation to a language. So, for Quine ―in language when we say something, we commit to some ontology. It says that our commitment to a particular ontology is determined by the language we use (or speak). This sort of ontology differs throughout languages (i.e., ontology varies from one language to another).

In this connection, let's try to understand the ontological status of fictional objects or entities (namely, ―Pegasus, ―unicorn, etc.,) based on the criterion of ontological commitment. Quine says, ―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 (Quine, 1948, p.22). But it is also true that when we think to deny fictional objects, it leads to the reality or existence of fictional objects in some context or the other. When we deny Pegasus (or other fictional entities), in a logical context it is admissible to have some ontology ―as what Wyman, a logician, has said that Parthenon is not red.‖ Thus, Quine writes, ―Saying that Pegasus is not actual is on a par, logically, with saying that the Parthenon is not red; in either case we are saying something about an entity whose being is unquestioned‖ (Quine, 1948, pp.22-23).

Thus, Quine does not opine, ―In ordinary language, where we do not have an ontology, we cannot make ontological claims (Gaudet, 2006, p. 31). When we say, ―we believe in ghost, here ―the belief‖ we are expressing is ontological. Hence, according to Quine, we can commit ontology to both ―being and non-being.

4. Conclusion

However, I have tried to explain Quine's idea of ontology and the issue of non-existential entities' ontological status. The findings that I got are as follows: Quine's way of dealing with ontological problems is different from traditional view. Unlike traditional view, Quine deals with the problems of ontology within the framework naturalism. It says that the idea of ontology is neither metaphysical nor epistemological, nor transcendental. Rather, it is purely naturalistic, for reality is limited to nature; it is impossible to find any reality outside space and time. Quine deals with the fundamental ontological problem ――what is there? by the involvement of language where language is also considered as a natural phenomenon. Quine, unlike traditional view, did not formulate the question ――what is there? as ―what objects (particulars, universals, or what not) are there. Rather, an ontologist should ask ―what does a theory says there is? where a theory is ―a well-defined language‖ and nothing else. As we have explained, Quine's idea of ontology can be best understood with the idea of ontological

commitment. Here he says that ―in language when we say something, we commit to some ontology. That is, our commitment to a particular ontology is determined by the language we use (or speak). In this connection, I have explained about the fictional entities which do not exist in reality. So, they do not have any ontology. But Quine did not say that ―in ordinary language, where we do not have an ontology, we cannot make ontological claims. When we say, ―we believe in ghost, here ―the belief‖ we are expressing is ontological. It implies that, for Quine our commitment to the ontology of both ―being and non-being‖ is possible.

Finally, one thing I would want to mention is that in this paper, I have tried to understand Quine's approach to ontological problems. It is true that, by this paper I did not establish a new theory based on Quine's idea of ontology. But I wouldn't hesitate to say that here, I have tried to make it simpler to understand Quine's standpoint in this regard.

Notes

1. Please see, the end of the title pages of Quine's book Word and Object, published in 1960.

2. Ghosh, J. (2013). Naturalized Semantics, pp. 26-31.

3. Quine, W.V. (1981). ―Empirical Content, p.24.

4. Quine, W.V. (1948). ―On What There Is? pp. 26-36.

5. Ghosh, J. (2013). p. 36.

6. Quine, W. V. (1943). ―Notes on Existence and Necessity, p. 113.

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