

THE CLOSING OF THE MIND: HOW THE PARTICULAR QUANTIFIER BECAME EXISTENTIALLY LOADED BEHIND OUR BACKS

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Abstract. The paper argues that the view that the particular quantifier is ‘existentially loaded’ is a relatively new one historically and that it has become entrenched in modern philosophical logic for less than happy reasons.

“Conviction is a more dangerous enemy of truth than lies are.” Nietzsche
(*Human, All too Human*, § 483).

1. The particular quantifier: The current orthodox view. Meinongians of various kinds, including noneists such as myself, hold that one can quantify over something without taking it to exist. More specifically, what is most naturally called the *particular* quantifier (being the dual of the *universal* quantifier) should not be read as ‘there exists’ – or even ‘there is’, there being no real difference between being and existence; it should simply be read as *some*, leaving it open whether the some in question exists or not. This view flies in the face of current orthodoxy, as is witnessed by the fact that nearly every logic textbook will simply call the particular quantifier the *existential* quantifier without further comment and write it as \exists , which invites this reading.¹ The view that the particular quantifier is “existentially loaded” is so engraved on the modern philosophical logicians’ mind that the mere suggestion that things might be otherwise is apt to produce what David Lewis, in a different context, called the incredulous stare. Here, for example, is Bill Lycan:²

I have to take my place amongst those who find *Relentlessly* (i.e., *genuinely* or *primitively*) Meinongian quantification simply unintelligible. However, in saying this, I am not using the term ‘unintelligible’ in its sneering post-Wittgensteinian sense. So far as I am able to introspect, I am not expressing any tendentious philosophical *qualm*. (For this reason, my use of the term may be irrevocably misleading.) I mean that I really cannot understand *Relentlessly* Meinongian quantification at all; to me it is *literally* gibberish or mere noise.³

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¹ For this reason, in Priest (2005) I write the particular quantifier as \mathfrak{S} (Fractur ‘S’, for ‘some’) – and the universal quantifier \mathfrak{A} (Fractur ‘A’, for ‘all’) to keep it company.

² Lycan (1979, p. 290). Italics in original.

³ To be fair to Lycan, he is not against quantification over things that most would take not to exist, such as Sherlock Holmes. What he finds unintelligible is having more than one kind of primitive quantifier, loaded and unloaded – or what he takes to amount to the same thing, an unloaded quantifier and an existence predicate, both of which are taken as primitive.

And here, more recently, is Terry Horgan:⁴

Noneism remains in a standoff with those, including myself, who find noneist quantification unintelligible.

Lycan and Horgan articulate the common view, though they may articulate it more forthrightly than is common.

The view in question is a distinctly puzzling one: examples of unloaded quantification are legion, and most native English speakers appear to have little difficulty in understanding them. Merely consider:⁵

I thought of something I would like to buy you for Christmas, but I couldn't get it because it doesn't exist (e.g., a perpetual motion machine).

One would think that, at the very least, such examples put the onus on those who think that such sentences are unintelligible to do more than just stare back.⁶

Despite this, I do not dispute the fact that Lycan, Horgan, and others find unloaded quantification unintelligible. But how is it that what seems so patently intelligible to myself and most native English speakers seems not so to the likes of them? The answer, I think, is essentially as follows. What is intelligible is not theory neutral. From the perspective of Newtonian science, it is incomprehensible how time can run at different rates for different observers; from the perspective of the Special Theory of Relativity, it is perfectly intelligible. To find the unintelligible intelligible, one merely has to work one's way into the different theoretical framework. So it is, I think, with quantification. If one's theory makes the particular quantifier existential by definition, the thought that the two notions might come apart is hard to get one's head around. But once one moves to a Meinongian (or a common sense) theoretical perspective, how this can be so is perfectly clear. Thus, when I meet people who (at least claim to) find unloaded quantification unintelligible, I am tempted to reply as did the Australian philosopher Brian Medlin on one occasion when, in its early years, he was advocating the mind–brain identity theory. Someone objected (?) 'I just don't understand what it would be for a mental process to be an inch behind your left eye'; he replied 'Get yer understander re-wired.'

2. The particular quantifier before the rise of modern logic.

2.1. Aristotle. This is all by way of introduction, however. I am not here concerned to expound a noneist theory of quantification, nor to defend its virtues.⁷ What interests me

⁴ Horgan (2007, p. 620).

⁵ Priest (2005, p. 152).

⁶ Compare the sentence with the following:

1. There exists something which I thought I would like to buy you for Christmas, but I couldn't get it because it doesn't exist
2. There is something which I thought I would like to buy you for Christmas, but I couldn't get it because it doesn't exist

1 is clearly self-contradictory. The status of 2 is less clear. Distinguishing between 'there is' and 'there exists' invites the view that there is a second-class notion of existence, 'subsistence' – a view that has caused much confusion and so is best avoided. Honestly, there is no difference between existence and being. For all that, it is possible, of course, to use 'there is' simply to mean 'some' if one wants.

⁷ This is done in Priest (2005).

presently is how the view that the particular quantifier expresses existence has come to be so ingrained in the psyche of contemporary philosophical logicians. The tale, I think, is an illuminating one.

It might be thought that the view is coeval with the origin of Western logic. Indeed, most philosophers could hardly be blamed for thinking so. The way that logic is taught in the contemporary curriculum is appallingly ahistorical. Most students are left with the impression that the fundamentals of logic have been fixed since the founder of logic, Aristotle – with the exception of a few heretics such as Hegel and Brouwer, if either of these rates a mention.

The view that the particular quantifier is existentially loaded is not, however, to be found in Aristotle (at least as far as I am aware). Of course, Aristotle does not talk of quantifiers at all. That terminology, and the modern understanding that goes with it, is of a later date. But quantificational locutions are central to syllogistic. And in the *Analytics*, where Aristotle reads things that we would now write as $\exists x(Sx \wedge Px)$, he says simply ‘*P* belongs to some *S*’ – nothing about some *S*s that exist. For example (pretty much at random):⁸

...[if] *R* belongs to every *S*, *P* to some *S*, *P* must belong to some *R*.

It could, of course, be maintained that by ‘some’ he meant *some existent*, since nonexistent things were out of bounds. But that is not right either. He also says:⁹

... one can signify even things that are not.

And in *On Ideas*, 82.6, we have:¹⁰

Indeed, we also think of things that in no way are ... such as hippocentaur and Chimaera.

2.2. Medieval logic. The great medieval logicians were even more explicit on the matter.¹¹ According to standard theories of *supposition*, “some *S*s are *P*s” is to be understood as:

a is a *P*, or *b* is a *P*, or ...

where $\langle a, b, \dots \rangle$ is an enumeration of all those things that are actually *S*. However, the also standard doctrine of *ampliation* tells us that ‘some *S*s will be [were] *P*s’ is to be understood as:

a will be [was] a *P*, or *b* will be [was] a *P*, or ...

where $\langle a, b, \dots \rangle$ is an enumeration of all those things that either are or will be [were] *S*. So the domain of supposition is amplified to a wider collection of objects. And the medievals had a very robust sense of reality. Future [past] objects (like the Antichrist [Socrates]) do not exist – though they will [did] exist.

It might be thought that we may simply identify existence *simpliciter* with existence at some time, as the medievals did not. But they go further. They held, applying the notion of ampliation again, that ‘some *S*s can be *P*s’ is to be understood as:

⁸ *An. Pr.* 28^b6-7. Translation from Barnes (1984).

⁹ *An. Post.* 92^b29-30. Translation from Barnes (1984).

¹⁰ The authenticity of this text is sometimes disputed. For a defence, see Fine (1993), from which the quote comes (p. 15).

¹¹ For more on the following, see Priest (2005, 3.7).

a can be a *P*, or *b* can be a *P*, or ...

where $\langle a, b, \dots \rangle$ is an enumeration of all those things that either are or could be *S*. The enumeration includes *possibilia*, things that do not exist (though they could do). Here, for example, is Buridan on the matter:¹²

A term put before the word ‘can’ ... is amplified to stand for possible things even if they do not and did not exist. Therefore the proposition ‘A golden mountain can be as large as Mont Ventoux’ is true.

William of Sherwood and other thirteenth-century figures speak quite unguardedly of terms amplified to things that do not exist.¹³ And Paul of Venice states categorically:¹⁴

The absence of the signification of a term from reality does not prevent the term’s suppositing for it.

The medievals standardly allowed that some verbs, notably intentional ones, amplified the supposition of a term to an even broader class of objects. Thus, Marsilius of Inghen writes:¹⁵

Ampliation is the supposition of a term ... for its significates which are or were, for those which are or will be, for those which are or can be, or for those which are or can be imagined.

And at least for some logicians, what can be imagined includes *impossibilia* too. A standard medieval example of an object of the imagination is a chimera. On at least one understanding, this is an impossible object – having incompatible essences. Here is Paul of Venice again:¹⁶

Although the significatum of the term ‘chimera’ does not and could not exist in reality, still the term ‘chimera’ supposits for something in the proposition ‘A chimera is thought of’, since it supposits for a chimera.

We see, then, that no connection was forged between the particular quantifier and existence in either Ancient or Medieval logic.

2.3. The nineteenth century. *Prima facie*, the matter is different when we come to the revival of logic in the 19th century prior to the rise of modern logic. The logicians of this period were concerned, among other things, with Aristotelian syllogistic inferences. One such is *Darapti*:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{All } A\text{s are } B\text{s} \\ \text{All } A\text{s are } C\text{s} \\ \hline \text{Some } B\text{s are } C\text{s} \end{array}$$

But this can be valid only if some things are *As*. This is alright since, for Aristotle, ‘All *As* are *Bs*’ entails ‘Some *As* are *Bs*.’ It is standard in the late nineteenth century to call this the matter of ‘existential import’ and is natural, therefore, to suppose that ‘some’ is now taken to mean ‘there exists’. But great care needs to be taken at this point.

¹² Buridan (2001, p. 299).

¹³ De Rijk (1982, p. 172).

¹⁴ Paul of Venice (1978, p. 13).

¹⁵ Maierù (1972, p. 182).

¹⁶ Paul of Venice (1978, p. 13).

For a start, medieval logicians, given the theory of supposition, held that ‘All *As* are *Bs*’ entails that some *As* exist. What they did not hold is that ‘All *As* were/will be/can be *Bs*’ entails that some *As* exist. Talking of the existential loading of the categorical syllogistic forms is, then, quite compatible with ‘some’ and ‘exists’ coming apart in other contexts. Of course, the nineteenth-century logicians had forgotten all about tense and modality. So maybe it might not have occurred to them that there were any other contexts. But a vestigial memory of medieval logic remained. This is clear when one sees how guardedly they use the term ‘exists’. Thus, Keynes’ discussion of existential import begins:¹⁷

The discussion of “existence” on which we are about to enter is no kind of metaphysical enquiry. By existence is merely meant membership of the domain of discourse, whatever that may happen to be...

... the universe of discourse will vary in different cases. It may be the whole universe of things, using the word “thing” in its very widest signification; but more usually the reference is to some limited universe. It is specially important to bear in mind that the universe of discourse is by no means necessarily identical with the region of what we ordinarily call “fact”; it may be the universe of dreams, or of imagination, or of some particular realm of imagination, e.g., modern fiction, or fairy land or the world of the Homeric poems.

And Venn’s discussion begins thus:¹⁸

A word of explanation at the outset, in order to avoid misapprehension. Any discussion about the ‘existence’ of such and such things will create the impression in some minds that we propose to enter on some kind of metaphysical enquiry. It must be clearly understood therefore that we intend to discuss the question on entirely scientific or logical ground, without digression towards considerations which are more appropriate to metaphysics. As to the nature of existence, or what may really be meant by it, we have hardly any need to trouble ourselves ... There can, in fact, be no fixed test for existence, for it will vary widely according to the nature of the subject-matter with which we are concerned in our reasonings. For instance, we may happen to be speaking of ordinary phenomenal existence, and at the time present; by the distinction in question is then meant nothing more and nothing deeper than what is meant by saying that there are such things as antelopes and elephants in existence, but not such things as unicorns and mastodons. If again we are referring to the sum-total of all that is conceivable, whether real or imaginary, then we should mean what is meant by saying that everything must be regarded as existent which does not involve a contradiction in terms, and nothing which does. Or if we were concerned with Wonderland and its occupants we need not go deeper down than they do who tell us that March hares live there. In other words, the interpretation of the distinction [between existence and non-existence] will vary very widely in different cases ...

¹⁷ Keynes (1894, pp. 181, 182).

¹⁸ Venn (1894, pp. 142 ff.).

‘Exists’, then, is a term of art. By all means, use the word ‘exists’, but it means no more than ‘is in the domain of discourse.’ And the objects in the domain may exist no more than the creatures of dreams and fictions.

3. The particular quantifier and the rise of modern logic.

3.1. Peirce and Frege. So when did the nexus between the particular quantifier and a robust notion of existence come to be forged? Very recently. It was with the formulation of the modern theory of the quantifier. Let us now turn to this. What we will see is how a relatively unselfconscious usage can turn into a bit of philosophical dogma behind people’s backs.

The modern theory of the quantifier was invented independently by two people, Peirce and Frege, at about the same time. Frege was a professional mathematician, whereas Peirce was not; Peirce knew quite a lot about the history of logic, including medieval logic, whereas Frege, as far as I know, did not. This may explain some of the differences between them.

Peirce writes the particular quantifier as Σ and reads it simply as ‘some’. For example:¹⁹

Here, in order to render the notation as iconical as possible we may use Σ for *some*, suggesting a sum, and Π for *all*, suggesting a product. Thus, $\Sigma_i x_i$ means that x is true of *some* one of the individuals denoted by i ...

What Peirce writes as $\Sigma_i x_i$ we would now write as $\exists i x(i)$, but the notation is close enough to the contemporary. Frege, of course, had a much more idiosyncratic, 2-dimensional notation. When it comes to the particular quantifier, as expressed in *Begriffsschrift* notation, he often reads it simply as ‘there is’ (‘Es gibt’²⁰). But he also calls such sentences ‘existential’ (‘Existentialsatz’²¹) and describes such sentences as ascribing the property of existence (‘Existenz Eigenschaft’²²) to a concept. Here is Frege explaining his view that existence is a second-order concept:²³

I have called existence a property of a concept. How I mean this to be taken is best made clear by an example. In the sentence ‘there is at least one square root of 4,’ we have an assertion not about (say) the definite number 2, nor about -2 , but about a concept *square root of 4*; viz. that it is not empty.

I think it wrong to read any heavy-duty metaphysics into all this, however: the vernacular glosses appear to be philosophically rather innocent. They are just the standard way that mathematicians talk when showing that *something* satisfies a certain condition; that its concept is, as Frege puts it, not empty.

Lest this be thought unduly deflationary, just note how often mathematicians use modal vocabulary – as thumbing through any mathematical textbook will reveal. For example, they say that one mathematical structure *can* be embedded in another. Or that, given a certain lemma, one *may* prove such and such a theorem. These locutions have nothing to

¹⁹ Kloesal (1993, p. 180). Italics in original.

²⁰ Frege (1980, pp. 35, 73).

²¹ Frege (1980, p. 35).

²² Frege (1980, p. 73).

²³ Geach & Black (1970, pp. 48–49).

do with possibility and necessity, much less permission and obligation. They are simply ways of expressing the fact that something satisfies a certain condition – a function (in the case of the embedding) or a deduction (in the case of the proof). So it is with talk of existence. Much as for Keynes and Venn, ‘exists’ is simply a term of art.

Frege says as much himself. In an article of 1897 comparing his own notation with Peano’s, he castigates logicians who take quantifier phrases to be names – even Peano sometimes falling into this trap. He then adds:²⁴

Existential sentences, beginning ‘there is,’ are closely related to particular ones: compare the sentence ‘there are numbers which are prime’ with ‘some numbers are prime.’ This existence is still too often confused with reality and objectivity.

Frege’s point can be made in another way. ‘Some’ and ‘there exists’ are not interchangeable in contexts where we *are* ontologically serious. Thus, ‘Some things do not exist’ and ‘there exist things that do not exist’ do not make the same point.

3.2. Russell. The next episode concerns Russell. And Russell, whatever he is, is no metaphysical innocent. His views on the matter at hand, like his views on so many things during the period in question, changed notably. The first phase concerns ‘On denoting’ (Russell, 1905). Here he wants to reject his former view (of the *Principles of Mathematics*) that there are objects that do not exist. But he still does not pack existence into the particular quantifier. He clearly takes it to be a substantial philosophical thesis that all objects exist, not a logical truism. When he comes to explaining the meaning of a sentence with the particular quantifier, $C(\text{something})$, he gives:

$C(x)$ is sometimes true.²⁵

There is one occasion in ‘On denoting’ where he explains the theory of descriptions using an explicit quantifier. (Usually, he uses the phrase ‘one and only one.’) Towards the end of the paper, in discussing the ontological argument, he glosses ‘The most perfect Being has all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore that one exists’ as:²⁶

There is one and only one entity x that is most perfect; that one has all perfections; existence is a perfection; therefore that one exists.

He notes the consequent failure of the argument:²⁷

As a proof, this fails for want of a proof of the premiss ‘there is one and only one entity x which is most perfect.’

But for present purposes, the thing to observe is that although he uses the phrase ‘there is’ for the particular quantifier, the notion of existence itself is left unanalysed.

Things change a little a few years later in *Principia Mathematica* (1910). Here, Russell still uses the same locutions to gloss the particular quantifier (as well as, occasionally, ‘some’). But now we also find:²⁸

²⁴ Frege (1984, p. 239).

²⁵ To be more precise, what he actually gives (Russell, 1905, p. 104 of reprint) is: It is false that ‘ $C(x)$ is false’ is always true.

²⁶ Russell (1905, p. 117 of reprint).

²⁷ *Loc cit.*

²⁸ Russell & Whitehead (1927, p. 15).

The symbol $\exists x\phi x$ may be read as ‘there exists an x for which ϕx is true’, or ‘there exists an x satisfying $\phi\hat{x}$ ’, and this conforms to the natural form of the expression of thought.

What Russell means by ‘the natural form of the expression of thought’ is not spelt out. Interestingly, though, Russell does not attempt to defend his reading of the particular quantifier, but neither is there any sign that he thinks that there is much to be said about it.

The matter is different a few years later. In his lectures on Logical Atomism (1918), Russell gives an explicit defence of the view that existence is expressed by, and only by, the particular quantifier. First, Russell states the view baldly, if somewhat confusedly:²⁹

When you take any propositional function and assert of it that it is possible, that it is sometimes true, that gives you the fundamental meaning of ‘existence’. You may express it by saying that there is at least one value of x for which that propositional function is true. Take ‘ x is a man,’ there is at least one value of x for which this is true. That is what one means by saying that ‘There are men,’ or that ‘Men exist.’ Existence is essentially a property of a propositional function. It means that the propositional function is true in at least one instance. If you say ‘There are unicorns,’ that will mean that ‘There exists an x , such that x is a unicorn.’ That is written in phrasing which is unduly approximated to ordinary language, but the proper way to put it would be ‘(x is a unicorn) is possible’ ... It will be out of the notion of *sometimes*, which is the same as the notion of *possible*, that we get the notion of existence [sic!]. To say that unicorns exist is simply to say that ‘(x is a unicorn) is possible.’

He then goes on to give his main argument for the view. He starts:³⁰

It is perfectly clear that when you say ‘Unicorns exist,’ you are not saying anything that would apply to any unicorns there might happen to be, because as a matter of fact, there are not any, and therefore if what you say had any application to the actual individuals, it could not possibly be significant unless it were true. You can consider the proposition ‘Unicorns exist,’ and see that it is false. It is not nonsense. Of course, if the proposition went through the general conception of the unicorn to the individual, it could not even be significant unless there were unicorns. Therefore when you say ‘Unicorns exist,’ you are not saying anything about any individual things, and the same applies when you say ‘Men exist.’

Russell claims that if one applies a predicate – and *a fortiori* the existence predicate – to something that does not exist, the result is meaningless. One might, of course, contest this; one might say that the result is false. But Russell’s claim is, in fact, irrelevant to the matter at hand. How are we to understand the statement ‘unicorns exist?’ This is not a generic claim, like ‘Dogs have four legs.’ Neither is it supposed to be the claim that *all* unicorns exist. As Russell says, we should understand it as the claim that there exist some unicorns, i.e.:

²⁹ Pears (1972, p. 89).

³⁰ Pears (1972, p. 90).

(*) Some things that are unicorns exist.

This may be spelt out naturally as: $\exists x(x \text{ is a unicorn} \wedge x \text{ exists})$. When thus spelt out, it is clear that the claim does not presuppose the existence of any unicorns, and (*) is simply false, as Russell claims, since there are no unicorns. But this clearly is quite compatible *both* with existence being a predicate of individuals *and* with the particular quantifier being existentially unloaded.

Russell continues:³¹

If you say ‘Men exist, and Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates exists,’ this is the same sort of fallacy as it would be if you said ‘Men are numerous, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is numerous,’ because existence is a predicate of a propositional function, or derivatively of a class. When you say of a propositional function that it is numerous, you will mean that there are several values of x that will satisfy it, that there are more than one; or, if you like to take ‘numerous’ in a larger sense, more than ten, more than twenty, or whatever number you think fitting. If x , y , and z all satisfy a propositional function, you may say that that proposition is numerous, but x , y , and z severally are not. Exactly the same applies to existence, that is to say that the actual things there are in the world do not exist, or, at least, that is putting it too strongly, because that is utter nonsense. To say that they do not exist is strictly nonsense, but to say that they exist is also strictly nonsense.

Russell asks us to compare two inferences:

Men exist	Men are numerous
<u>Socrates is a man</u>	<u>Socrates is a man</u>
Socrates exists	Socrates is numerous

and claims that the same sort of fallacy is involved in both. We are supposed to conclude that the conclusion of the first is ungrammatical, as is that of the second. But the analogy is lame, as should have been clear to Russell had he not already been in the grip of his view. To say that men are numerous is indeed to say that many things are men. In the right context, this is true, as is the other premise. The conclusion, however, is *clearly* nonsense. The inference is therefore fallacious. The first argument, too, is fallacious. But that is simply because it is of the form:

$$\frac{\exists x(Mx \wedge Ex)}{\frac{Ms}{Es}}$$

Note that the corresponding inference with a universal major premise

All men exist	$\forall x(Mx \rightarrow Ex)$
<u>Socrates is a man</u>	<u>Ms</u>
Socrates exists	Es

seems perfectly valid. (All the people in this story actually exist; Routley is in this story, so Routley is an actually existing person.) And the conclusion of both arguments, that

³¹ Pears (1972, p. 90).

Socrates exists, is *prima facie* perfectly grammatical. Compare ‘Routley exists, but Father Christmas does not.’ Russell’s argument does nothing to show matters to be otherwise.

In the next paragraph, we find a further, subsidiary, argument:³²

You can also see [that it is only of propositional functions that it makes sense to assert existence] in various ways. For instance, you sometimes know the truth of an existence-proposition without knowing any instance of it. You know that there are people in Timbuctoo, but I doubt if any of you could give me an instance of one. Therefore you clearly can know existence-propositions without knowing any instances that make them true. Existence propositions do not say anything about the actual individual but only about the class or function.

This argument is a shocker. Of course you can know the truth of a sentence starting with a particular quantifier, such as $\exists x(Mx \wedge Ex)$, without knowing the truth of any particular instance, just as you can know the truth of a disjunction without knowing the truth of one of the disjuncts. But this is *completely irrelevant*. It remains the case that the quantifier is existentially unloaded and that existence may be expressed by a monadic predicate.

One might naturally ask at this point whether Russell really believed that the particular quantifier encodes existence because of such poor arguments. I doubt it. The arguments have all the hallmarks of an *ex post facto* justification for a way of talking that Russell had already gotten into.³³

3.3. Quine. Let us now come to the definitive moment of the story: Quine’s ‘On what there is.’ In this, the view that the particular quantifier expresses existence – or, as Quine is wont to put it: to be is to be the value of a bound variable – is endorsed with panache.³⁴ The full passage is again worth quoting. Having argued that the use of predicates does not commit us to the existence of universals, Quine continues:³⁵

At this point McX begins to wonder whether there is any limit at all to our ontological immunity. Does *nothing* we say commit us to the assumption of universals or other entities which we may find unwelcome?

I have already suggested a negative answer to this question, in speaking of bound variables, or variables of quantification, in connection with Russell’s theory of descriptions. We can very easily involve ourselves in

³² Pears (1972, p. 91).

³³ Some may wonder about the influence of Kant on Russell. It is often suggested that Kant undermines the ontological argument for the existence of God by pointing out that existence is not a predicate (of things). But what Kant actually says is that it is not a *determining* predicate (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A598=B626, ff.). This is to do with the *semantic* function of the predicate; the predicate is a perfectly legitimate *syntactic* one. And as we have already noted, Russell observed in ‘On denoting’ that the theory of descriptions already undermines the ontological argument, whatever is said about existence.

³⁴ The bridge between Russell and Quine is, presumably, Carnap. In *The Logical Syntax of Language*, Carnap (1937, p. 20) explains the particular quantifier simply with the following words:

... let ‘Red’ be a [one place predicate]; ‘Red(3)’ will mean: “The position 3 is red.” ... [Now, let] ‘ $(\exists x)(\text{Red}(x))$ ’ [mean]: “At least one position is red”, and therefore: “There is (at least) one position that is red.”

³⁵ Quine (1948, pp. 12–13 of the reprint). Italics in original.

ontological commitments by saying, for example, that *there is something* (bound variable) which red houses and sunsets have in common; or that *there is something* which is a prime number and larger than a million. But this is, essentially, the *only* way that we can involve ourselves in ontological commitment: by our use of bound variables. The use of alleged names is no criterion, for we can repudiate their namehood at the drop of a hat unless the assumption of a corresponding entity can be spotted in the things we affirm in terms of bound variables. Names are, in fact, altogether immaterial to the ontological issue, for I have shown, in connection with ‘Pegasus’ and ‘pagasize’, that names can be converted into descriptions, and Russell has shown that descriptions can be eliminated. Whatever we say with the help of names can be said in a language which shuns names altogether. To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable.³⁶

The logic of the text is interesting. Quine argues that the use of names and predicates *is not* existentially committing, but there is absolutely no argument given as to why quantification *is* existentially committing. Quine simply *assumes* that the domain of quantification comprises existent objects – or what comes to the same thing, that the particular quantifier is to be read as ‘there is’. No argument is given for this: it is stated simply as a matter of dogma. (So if neither names, nor predicates, nor quantifiers are ontologically committing, what is? To say that something exists, of course! Quine, one might say, is one of those philosophers who have united in ruining the good old word ‘exist’.³⁷) At any rate, if Russell used bad arguments for the view, Quine uses none at all.

The passage in ‘On what there is’ that is usually taken to give the most destructive critique of the notion of nonexistent objects is the celebrated passage about the fat man in the doorway. This is supposed to show that it is impossible to give identity criteria for nonexistent objects so that the notion is incoherent. Let us look at the passage closely. The boldfacing is mine and picks out rhetorical tropes.³⁸

Wyman’s **overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely**. It **offends the aesthetic sense** of us who have **a taste for desert landscapes**, but this is not the worst of it. Wyman’s **slum of possibles** is a **breeding ground for disorderly elements**. Take, for instance, the possible fat man in the doorway; and, again, the possible bald man in the doorway. **Are they the same possible man, or two possible men? How do we decide? How many possible men are there in the doorway? Are there more possible thin ones than fat ones? How many of them are alike? Or would their being alike make them one? Are no two possible things alike? Is this the same as saying that it is impossible for two things to**

³⁶ Recall that ‘entity’ comes from the Latin word ‘ens’, meaning (a) being.

³⁷ What, then, is it to exist? My own view is that the things that exist are exactly those things that enter into causal interactions. I do not take this to be a *definition* of existence, however: it is a substantial metaphysical thesis. Thus, I do not hear platonism as a self-contradictory doctrine. I doubt that it is possible to give any very illuminating explanation of the meaning of ‘exists’. Some notions seem so fundamental to our thought that they resist explanation in any but circular terms. (Try explaining the generic notion of *set* without using words like ‘collection’, ‘aggregate’, etc.) Existence, it seems to me, is such a notion.

³⁸ Quine (1948, p. 4).

be alike? Or, finally, is the concept of identity simply not applicable to unactualized possibles? But what sense can be found in talking of entities which cannot meaningfully be said to be identical with themselves and distinct from one another? These elements are **well-nigh incorrigible**. By a Fregean **therapy** of individual concepts, some effort might be made at **rehabilitation**; but I feel we'd do better simply to **clear Wyman's slum** and be done with it.

The passage starts with abuse, claiming that *possibilia* are offensive. Perhaps there is an appeal to Ockham's razor here. But no attempt is made to show that the entities are being invoked beyond necessity. The passage is carried largely by its rhetorical content. Then, we have the passage supposed to show that the identity criteria of *possibilia* are problematic. But do we find an argument here? No. We merely find a barrage of questions. The sequence is one long rhetorical trope. No attempt is made to show that there are no plausible answers to the questions. Moreover, many of them have obvious answers. For example: How many possible men are there in the doorway? None: *possibilia* are not in space and time or, therefore, doorways.³⁹ Quine even notes that there is a possible solution – endorsed by his own teacher, Carnap, though he does not mention this fact – but the answer is not even considered. Finally, *possibilia* are dismissed by an appeal to Quine's feelings. Exercising charity, we need not take this simply as a report of his subjective mental states but as a claim about what grounds them. What? Perhaps the judgement that his own view has more methodological virtues. But we are given no argument for this; instead, we get the rhetoric of slum clearance.

In fact, much of the whole paper is carried not by argument but by rhetoric. Here are another couple of examples: 'Wyman, by the way, is one of those philosophers who have united in ruining the good old word "exist"⁴⁰ and 'For McX this is an unusually penetrating speech.'⁴¹ Even McX and Wyman are rhetorical caricatures: Quine appears to have no interest in engaging with actual historical philosophers and their arguments.⁴² (When one reads Quine's literary corpus with an eye for the matter, it is remarkable to note how often the weight of an argument is carried simply by a fine turn of phrase.)

Quine's paper was hugely influential; the view he championed is now so ingrained in modern logicians that they find it hard, sometimes impossible, to think outside the box – as we have noted. The success, I am afraid, is more the result of Quine's silver rhetoric than his arguments.

4. Conclusion: The closing of the logicians' mind. Thus, in the first half of the twentieth century, did the view that the particular quantifier encodes existence become entrenched. I am not suggesting that there are no other arguments for taking the particular quantifier to be existentially loaded, possibly even in Quine's later corpus. My aim here,

³⁹ On all this, see Priest (2005, 5.4, 5.5).

⁴⁰ Priest (2005, p. 3).

⁴¹ Priest (2005, p. 11).

⁴² Unlike Quine, Russell does have serious arguments against the historical Meinong. But these target the Characterisation Principle – a matter orthogonal to the existential loading of the quantifier (see Priest, 2005, 5.3). Even those who subscribe to unloaded quantification cannot accept the Characterisation Principle in its naivest form (Priest, 2005, 4.2). And restricted versions of the principle are perfectly acceptable to those who take quantifiers to be loaded. Thus, for Russell, it holds when there exists a unique thing satisfying the characterisation.

as I said at the beginning of the essay, has not been to adjudicate that issue. It has been to look at how the view that the quantifier is loaded became so unquestionable to most contemporary logicians. And with the publication and uptake of Quine's 'On what there is,' this is effectively achieved.

To conclude, the view that the particular quantifier is existentially loaded is a relatively recent one in historical terms. The reading of the particular quantifier as 'there exists' enters the philosophical box as a term of art in the late nineteenth century. The reading then becomes orthodox – most of the logicians between Frege and Quine were, after all, mathematicians who found it quite natural to talk in that way – but not for good philosophical reasons. The lid was finally slammed down on the box by Quine with an elegant touch of rhetoric. In politics, the closing of the innocent mind is a dangerous enterprise⁴³; in philosophy also.

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