

Plato's Beard, and some varieties of shaving

The debate about non-existent objects relies on a classical argument, named “Plato’s Beard” by Quine : the conclusion of this argument is Meinong’s thesis that there are things of which it is true that there are no such things, and its main premise is any Problematic Existential Statement (PES), e.g. “Pegasus doesn’t exist”.

When presented in a detailed way, this argument goes in different steps, each of which has been refused by some philosopher. Neo-meinongians refuse the last step to avoid the formal contradiction apparent in Meinong’s formulation, but they accept all previous steps as evident logical inferences ; anti-meinongian have refused earlier steps on ontological motivations (not to get non-existents in our inventory of the world). My overall project is to show that we can satisfy both motivations, i.e. we can show that the neo-meinongian is right in accepting all (but the last) inferences in Plato’s Beard, and that the anti-meinongian is right to maintain that *literally* there are no non-existent things.

The most prominent anti-meinongian solutions have been proposed by Kant, Quine, Plantinga, and Salmon. I defend that they have wrongly focused our attention on Singular Negative Existentials (SNE : sentences like “Pegasus doesn’t exist”), since SNEs are a much easier cases than Quantified Negative Existentials (QNE: sentences like “some characters in this book don’t exist”).

How precisely are QNEs problematic for the anti-meinongian ? In two ways. First the traditional anti-meinongian formalisation of “exist” will fail to give an account of the ***semantics of QNEs***. Indeed, if $\exists y.y = x$ is the appropriate formalisation of “x exists”, then a sentence like “All characters in this book exist” will have the following form : $\forall x.(char(x) \rightarrow \exists y.y = x)$. But this formula is a tautology, so it can’t be what the original sentence expresses. There may be various Quinean fixes here, but all the ones I can think of have the following characteristics : they introduce a new heterogeneous (not to say *ad hoc*) treatment of existential sentences ; and they involve a pragmatic correction (what my interlocutor really said is tautological, but he probably didn’t *mean* a tautology, thus I can figure out the *other* proposition he badly expressed with his sentence).

This pragmatic correction procedure is linked to the second problem raised by QNEs against anti-meinongianism, namely the problem of accounting for the ***grammaticality of QNEs***. How are grammaticality and pragmatic correction linked ? In the following way : contemporary linguistics (e.g. works by Keenan) show that some determiners (like *all, most, the, ...*) have the peculiarity of yielding *ungrammaticality* in “there is” sentences (e.g. **there are most cats in the garden*). If the anti-meinongian is right that the *normal* meaning of “exist” is just the same as the meaning of “there is”, then the *normal* reading (before pragmatic correction) of *S* “all characters in this book exist” should be just as bad as **“there are all characters in this book”*. That is : *S* should not only *express a tautology*, it should also be an *ungrammatical sentence*. And if pragmatic correction can save a sentence from meaninglessness, it can’t save it from ungrammaticality (“happy I” is easy to save from meaninglessness, but will stay ungrammatical). Thus the anti-meinongian seems to wrongly predict that QNEs are *ungrammatical*, though they can be saved from meaninglessness.

The problem of grammaticality of QNEs leads us to the heart of the question : if QNEs are grammatical, this means that the structure on which their meaning is constructed has all the features to construct a successful meaning. One of those features for a determiner like *all* is, according to Keenan, a complement of what is predicated, namely a domain of non-existents.

Thus, if the structure on which QNEs get their meaning is directly *reality* (referential semantics), then the grammaticality of QNEs requires that our inventory of the world contains non-existent things.

I suggest that a cognitive semantics (in which linguistic items get their meaning on a mind-dependant model, which in turn gets its meaning on reality) can help solve the problem. Some mind-dependant models, call them intermediary, may be correlated with reality in a semantic relation more complex than a one-one relation. Thus having a domain of non-existents in an intermediary model (in order to account for the grammaticality and meaning of QNEs) does not entail that *our inventory of the world* contains non-existents. There would be such an entailment only if QNEs were true *on an ultimate model* (a model that is, at least, in a one-one semantic relation with reality). Let us call *literally true* a sentence true on an ultimate model, and *non-literally true* a sentence true on an intermediary model. In this framework, there is an elegant solution to Plato's Beard : the anti-meinongian's motivation to block one inference was that the premise was true while the conclusion is false, thus one inference had not preserved truth. Our framework allows us to say the following : the conclusion is false all-right, but only *literally false*, so the inference would be non-truth-preserving (invalid) only if the premise were also *literally false*. But why assume so ? It seems right to say that "Pegasus exist" is true only on a cognitive (intermediary) model in which there is a cognitive entity corresponding to Pegasus, i.e. *non-literally true* ; and in *that* non-literal sense, the conclusion is just as *true*.

Thus we needn't consider any step of Plato's Beard (but the last one) as non-truth-preserving : any of them preserves non-literal truth as non-literal, and literal truth as literal.