Course "The Ontology of Predication"
ENS, Fall 2008/9 - Handout 7

0. Résumé

- Let us resume the argument leading to Parmenides' Paradox of Non-Being (from Fitting and Mendelsohn [1998], *First-Order Modal Logic*, Kluwer, Dordrecht):

(P1) To deny the existence of something, one has to refer to that thing;
(P2) But one can only refer to things that exist;
(C) Therefore, to deny the existence of something, that thing has to exist.

From (C) follows that all negative existential statements are either false or self-refuting, therefore **everything exists** (the Parmenidean Thesis).

- By contraposition one has from (P2) that **one cannot refer to things that do not exist**. To "refer to" should be taken both as linguistic reference and as mental, intentional reference: Parmenides has it that one cannot *speak of* and *think of* what is not.

- Richard Cartwright's reformulation:

"To deny the existence of something – of unicorns, for example – we must indicate what it is the existence of which is being denied; and this requires that unicorns be referred to or mentioned; the negative existential must be about them. But things which do not exist cannot be referred to or mentioned; no statement can be about them. So, given that we have denied their existence, unicorns must after all exist. The apparently true negative existential is thus either false or not really a statement at all; and, since the argument applies as well in any other case, we seem forced to conclude that there are no true negative existentials." (R. Cartwright [1960], "Negative Existentials", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 57, p. 630)

- Most analytic philosophers (Russell, Quine, van Inwagen) **accept (P2): one cannot refer to nonexistents**, and truly ascribe properties to them. So they solve the paradox by **denying (P1): one does not need to refer to something** (by standard referential devices, such as names or referential quantification) **to deny its existence**.

- However, **most analytic philosophers are also (neo-)Parmenideans**: they subscribe to the view that everything exists – e.g., Quine begins *On What There Is* by claiming that the fundamental ontological question ("What is there?") can be answered in one word: "Everything".

1. Parmenidean accounts of existential predication from Hume to Quine

1.1. Hume: "Existence is no news"

- In the *Treatise of Human Nature* Hume supports the Parmenidean view of existence via an argument based upon his empirical theory of knowledge: any knowledge starts from sensory *impressions* impinging upon our sensory apparatus. *Ideas* are just impoverished images variously derived from impressions, etc.

- Now Hume claims that **the very idea of a nonexistent object is absurd**. This comes from a dilemma: either (a) the idea of existence derives from a distinct impression conjoined with any perception of something or other; or (b) it has to be identical with the very idea of the thing. But (a) is inadmissible: one couldn't find *any* impression accompanying *each and every* perception of anything whatsoever (except for trivial properties of anything we can perceive, such as being self-identical).

- Thus we are left with (b): **the idea of existence is but the idea of what we conceive as existent**. ("Existence is not a property", one is tempted to translate.) Those who disagree, challenges Hume, should say exactly *which* distinct idea existence would consist in. This cannot be done, for existence adds nothing to the idea of the thing of which we claim that it exists: **existence is no news**.

- Norman Malcolm's example had to do with a king specifying a list of qualities required from an aspiring chancellor: could *existence* be meaningfully included in the list? ("No nonexistent candidates can apply": see N. Malcolm [1960], "Anselm's Ontological Argument", *Philosophical Review* 69, pp. 41-62)

1.2. Kant: "Existence is not a predicate"

- Kant's claim comes from his famous discussion of the so-called ontological argument for the existence of God in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Actually, Kant doesn't say that existence is not a predicate, but that it is not a *determining* or *real* predicate, which means: a predicate which can be meaningfully included in the definition or the concept of an object:

"By whatever and by however many predicates we may think a thing - even if we completely determine it — we do not make the least addition to the thing when we further declare that this thing is. [...] If we think in a thing every feature of reality except one, the missing reality is not added by my saying that this defective thing exists." (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B628)

- Kant's example is: the concept of 100 real thalers includes nothing more than the concept of 100 merely possible thalers. By claiming that they *exist*, I add nothing to the concept of the 100 thalers.

- What is existential predication, then? What does one claim of *x* when one claims that *x* exists? To claim that God is omnipotent is "to posit [*setzen*] the subject in connection with the predicate", that is, to perform a mental (judgment) or linguistic (assertion) act to the effect that the object has the relevant property. But to claim that God exists is just to "**posit the object in itself with all its predicates**". Which means that existential predications are claims to the effect that the relevant object is "posited in the global context of experience". Existence is simple, absolute "position", and that's about all one can say on it.

1.3. The received view: two Fregean theses

- Frege establishes the two main claims of the received view on existential predication: (1) **existence is a second-order concept or property** (a property of properties, not of individuals) (2) existence is to be reduced to the notion of **quantification**.

- But (1) as an expression of the so-called *second-order view* of existential predication is misleading: it is not that existence *as such* is not a property of individuals, but a property of properties (as if one could claim that such-and-such property *exists*). When one makes such claims as "Brad Pitt exists", or "There are cats", one is ascribing to some property the property of ***being instantiated,*** or *exemplified*.

- To say that there are cats is to claim that the property of being a cat is instantiated. And to say that unicorns do not exist is to say that the property of being a unicorn isn't exemplified: **existence is explained away**: "there is/are", "exist(s)" have to disappear in the analysis, being substitutable in all contexts by "has instances" or something of the sort.

- To say that Brad Pitt exists is to claim that some property is instantiated. But which one? This is a delicate issue (more on this later).

- One could claim that Brad Pitt has the higher-order property of having some (first-order) property or other. The claim that "propertyhood" entails existence is called **serious actualism** (e.g. Plantinga's *The nature of Necessity*):

"Serious actualism is the thesis that it is not possible for an object to have a property without existing, that is, is the thesis that exemplification entails existence" (Linsky and Zalta [1994], "In Defense of the Simplest QML", *Philosophical perspectives*, p. 437).

Serious Actualism entails the Parmenidean Thesis: to say that for any property *P*, *x* instantiates *P* iff *x* exists is to say that everything exists, if one takes objects just as property-bearers.

- "Brad Pitt exists" means just "Brad Pitt exemplifies properties". So we are close to Kant and Hume: despite grammatical appearances, "exists" is not an ordinary predicate adding something to the concept of the object to which it applies. There is no self-sufficient property of existence.

- Thesis (2) (existence is to be reduced to quantification) is notorious: in the *Ideography*, Frege introduces the notion (now symbolized as) $\exists$ reading it just as "there is" or "is given" (*Es gibt*). But he calls the formulas that begin with the quantifier *existential* statements (*Existentialsätze*), describing them as sentences in which the property of having instances is ascribed to a concept.

- In the *Foundations of Arithmetic* the connection between **existence, quantification and numbering** is explicit. *Existence*, like *number*, is a property of concepts, not of objects. Frege's example: if one says "The emperor's horses are four" one ascribes the property of being four, not to the horses singularly taken (as when one says "The emperor's horses are black"). One ascribes the property of having four instances to the concept *emperor's horse*. Analogously, when one claims "There are horses" one ascribes the property of having at least one instance to the concept *horse*.

- Hint: why do we call it *existential* quantifier? The dual of "universal" is "particular", not "existential"… More on this later.

1.4. The received view: Russellian propaganda

- Russell in the *Lectures on Logical Atomism* (p 90):

"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 that will satisfy it [...] 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 to compare two inferences:

Men exist	Men are numerous
Socrates is a man	Socrates is a man
Socrates exists	Socrates is numerous

and says that the same sort of fallacy is involved in both. So we should conclude that the conclusion is ungrammatical in both cases.

- How does the standard view deal with singular existential predications, such as "Pegasus does not exist"? Of which properties does one denies their being instantiated? Recall that non-denoting singular terms pose problems to Kripke's **theory of direct reference**: for if the meaning of a proper name is exhausted by its bearer (the so-called **Millian view**), then empty names provide no semantic contribution to the sentences in which they occur. How can these sentences express complete propositions? (A. Everett and T. Hofweber (eds.) [2000], *Empty Names, Fiction, and the Puzzles of Non-Existence*, CSLI, Stanford-CA).

- Russell provided (a part of) the famous solution in *On Denoting*… (So famous it hardly needs rehearsing)

1.5. The received view: Quine's elimination of proper names and the criterion of ontological commitment

- Quine's two main contributions to the received view are (1) the extension of Russell's treatment to proper names, and (2) the development of the link between quantification and existence into a methodological slogan.

- As for (1), Quine begins from an epistemic problem: of which proper names we can *know* for sure that they denote? People do use names without knowing for sure whether there exists an object designated by them, or with the explicit intention of avoiding any commitment on that ("Yeti", "Vulcan" (the planet), "God", "Buddha"). Hence Russell's claim that only "this" or "that" count as logically proper names, etc.

- In *On What There Is*, Quine proposes that **proper names be reformulated so as to count as definite descriptions** "the author of the *Metaphysics*", "the philosopher who drank the hemlock", etc. If needed, we can even have ad hoc translations or coin new predicates, such as "the *x* that Pegasizes". Next, we apply Russell's treatment: to claim that Pegasus doesn't exist is to claim that there's no (unique) flying horse captured by Bellerophon, or that there is no (unique) *x* such that *x* Pegasizes.

- As for (2): Quine links quantification and existence in the famous slogan "**To be is to be the value of a (bound) variable**". Once descriptions and proper names have been paraphrased away, their use is not, by itself, existence-committing. Quine asks if there is nothing one can say which *does* commit one to the existence of something. There is:

"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 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 I have shown, in connection with 'Pegasus' and 'pegasize', that names can be converted

into descriptions, and Russell has shown that descriptions can be eliminated […]. To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable." (W.V.O. Quine, *On What There Is*, pp. 12-13 of the reprint).

2. The Meinongian strategy

2.1. Some notorious problems of the received view on existential predication

- There are many well-known problems with the Parmenidean, received view. Firstly, by embracing the Parmenidean Thesis that one cannot refer to nonexistents, one is forced to give ***systematic* paraphrases**. People talk as if they referred to nonexistent objects. Either this is taken at face value, or not. The first horn is unacceptable for the Parmenidean. But nobody knows how to go through the second horn: one would have to paraphrase systematically, à la Russell-Quine, not only negative existential predications, but also any sentence including (apparent) reference to nonexistents. Not only this hasn't been done so far, but also, no one has any idea of how this *could* be done.

- Secondly, Kripke has abundantly shown that **proper names cannot be reduced to descriptions**: to begin with, there are the classic arguments to the effect that descriptions cannot provide the meaning of a name, although they can be used to fix the referent. Besides, names and descriptions appear to behave quite differently with respect, e.g., to *de re* and *de dicto* modal contexts…

- Thirdly, the Russell-Quine paraphrase **delivers the wrong truth-values**: all sentences including (apparently) non-denoting terms turn out to be *false*; which goes against our intuition that some are *true* (Pegasus is a winged horse, Holmes is a detective living in Baker Street).

2.2. Some things do not exist

- There is an alternative, non-Parmenidean tradition for which the Paradox of Non-Being is to be resolved, quite simply, by dropping the premise (P2) of the argument: **some things do not exist**, **and one *can* refer to them, think and talk about them**.

- Aristotle, for example, claims:

"One can signify even things that are not." (*Analytica Posteriora*, 92b29-30)

- Meinongianism – that is, roughly, the archipelago of metaphysical doctrines inspired by the work of the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong – promises a *prima facie* simple treatment of the semantics of predications involving nonexistent entities. The simplicity comes from the *prima facie* intuitiveness of the underlying ontology.

- First, Meinongians **distinguish the *Sein* of objects – their existential status – from their *Sosein*, their having – certain – features or properties** (which properties? This is a key issue to be addressed later). And Meinongians claim that an object can have a set of features even if it doesn't exist. This is the so-called "**Principle of Independence**" (see A. Meinong [1969], *Über Gegenstandstheorie*, in Haller and Kindinger [1969-73] (eds.), *Alexius Meinong Gesamtausgabe*, Graz, Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt).

- Second, this intuition has a beautifully simple technical treatment. Primitive quantifiers, say, Λ and Σ (to be read as "for all" and "for some") are taken as **existentially neutral**: one can quantify on, and talk in general of, nonexistents. **Existence is taken as expressible via a perfectly normal first-order predicate** –

say, *E!* – employed in order to provide explicit existential commitment and to define the existentially loaded quantifiers. "All existing things are such that…" is:

(1) $\forall x\alpha[x] =_{df} \Lambda x(E!x \rightarrow \alpha[x])$;

and "There exists something such that..." is:

(2) $\exists x\alpha[x] =_{df} \Sigma x(E!x \wedge \alpha[x])$.

- Meinong claimed "There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects" (Meinong [1969], p. 490). But this is not a flat contradiction at all, when one has distinguished the two couples of quantifiers – on the contrary, it is mirrored in everyday talk:

(3) "There is something which has been sought by many, namely the site of Atlantis, but it does not exist" (N. Wolstertorff [1961], "Referring and Existing", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 11: 335-49).

(4) "I thought of something I would like to give you as a Christmas gift, but I couldn't buy it for you because it doesn't exist" (G. Priest [2005], *Towards Non-Being. The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Oxford, Oxford UP).

- One should notice that also **in classical logic we can have a perfectly good first-order existence predicate:**

(5) $E!x =_{df} \exists y(y = x)$.

Besides, even if Meinongians treat "exists" as primitive in the sense that it does not receive an explicit definition, in some forms of Meinongianism (e.g. R. Routley [1980], *Exploring Meinong's Jungle and beyond*, Canberra, RSSS, Australian national University; R. Routley [1982], "On What There Is Not", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, pp. 151-77) only concrete objects can exist, whereas abstract objects cannot; "exists", in theories of this kind, means something like "has causal powers", "is located in space and time", etc. In Meinongian logics, *contra* the Quinean motto, to be (to exist) is *not* to be the value of a (bound) variable (see T. [1980], *Nonexistent Objects*, New Haven, Conn., Yale UP; E. Zalta [1983], *Abstract Objects: an Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics*, Dordrecht, Reidel).

- That quantifiers must be existentially loaded is a recent, and unfortunate, invention. Medieval logicians took for granted that one can refer to, name, and quantify on, nonexistents – and make true claims on them. Here is, for instance, the *Logica magna*, by Paul of Venice (my fellow citizen):

"Although the significatum of the term "chimera" does 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" (Paul of Venice, *Logica magna. Secunda pars*, ed. F. del Punta [1978], Oxford, Oxford UP).

- *Prima facie*, the simple Meinongian treatment seems to fare much better than the Russell-Quine analysis, for two reasons. First, there is **no need to introduce any paraphrase** in order to eliminate (what appear to be) non-denoting singular terms: no need to turn "The present king of France is bald" into "There is exactly one *x*, such that *x* …", etc., or to introduce Quinean *ad hoc* descriptions such as "the *x* that Pegasizes". The grammatical surface of "The present king of France is bald" and of "Pegasus is a winged horse" can be taken at face value, treating the singular terms at issue as authentic names or descriptions, referring to nonexistent objects.

- Second, the analysis respects the aforementioned intuition that some claims concerning nonexistents can be true, whereas the Russell-Quine treatment makes all of them indiscriminately false. A sentence like:

(6) Ulysses is ϕ

will be true just in case the individual denoted by "Ulysses" is one of the things that make ϕ true (and we don't need to engage in historical investigations to ascertain whether Ulysses existed before we can unfold the real logical form of (6)). Nonexistent things are capable of bearing (certain) properties, and of making some claims true and some other claims false: "Sherlock Holmes is a detective" and "The present king of France is a king" are true. "Pegasus is a pig" and "Homer Simpson lives in London" are false (the former is a winged horse, not a pig; the latter lives in Springfield, not in London).

2.3. Some troubles

- These are only *prima facie* advantages. Those familiar with the topic know that the story works only because we have chosen our examples carefully. Meinongian metaphysics faces difficulties insistently raised by those who subscribe to the Russell-Quine analysis and to the Quinean motto.

- Some are general problems concerning nonexistent entities, for instance: ***how* can we refer to, name, and even know things that do not exist, since we cannot have any causal interaction with them?** What criterion might we resort to in order to tell, when *x* and *y* are merely possible entities, if *x* = *y* or not? ("the possible fat man in the doorway", "the possible bald man in the doorway", to stick to the Quinean example).

- Meinongians have provided (more or less) convincing replies to some of these criticisms, for instance via accounts of how reference to nonexistent objects can be achieved (see e.g. E. Zalta [2003], "Referring to Fictional Characters", *Dialectica* 57, pp. 243-54), and by providing criteria of identity for nonexistents (see e.g. Parsons, Routley). Of all the difficulties around, we will address two main ones. To explain them, some background information is required.

- Endorsement of Meinongianism pushes one towards the thesis that ***any* singular term denotes an object, existent or not**. This solves any Millian problem for the theory of direct reference. And this holds in particular for (definite and indefinite) descriptions. We therefore have what Parsons calls, by analogy with naïve set theory, an "**Unrestricted Comprehension Principle" for objects**:

(UCP) For any condition $\alpha[x]$ with free variable *x*, some object satisfies $\alpha[x]$.

This gives us the schema:

(7) $\Sigma x \alpha[x]$

- Actually, Russell's famous criticisms of Meinong addressed definite descriptions (see B. Russell [1905], Review of A. Meinong, *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandtheorie und Psychologie*, *Mind* 14, pp. 530-8), so the UCP might accordingly be reformulated as:

(UCP) Any definite description $\imath x \alpha[x]$ designates an object satisfying the description.

This gives us the schema:

(8) $\alpha[\iota x \alpha[x]]$.

- The intuition is that **we specify an object via a given set of properties**, such as *is a winged horse, is captured by Bellerophon*, *climbs Mount Olympus in search of the Chimera*, *... .* Suppose $\alpha[x]$ is the conjunction of the relevant predicates; then, according to the UCP, an object is described by $\alpha[x]$. If you call the object so described "Pegasus", *p*, then Pegasus has the pertinent set of properties: $\alpha[p]$.

- The UCP should hold *a priori*: objects have the properties they are characterized as having, and that's why we usually know what we are talking about when we talk about them. Reference to nonexistents is a *public* phenomenon, and people are corrigible on this: suppose I tell you about Santa Claus, a guy who is a great detective living in Victorian London, 221b Baker Street, good friend of Watson, … You might tell me: I think you are actually talking of Holmes, not Santa.

- However, the UCP in its naïve form leads to unacceptable consequences and is doomed to go down in flames. The two main troubles we want to consider date back to Russell, and have been taken as a definitive refutation of Meinongianism *tout-court*. They are (1) the objection from inconsistency, and (2) the claim that the UCP allows us to show that anything exists. Let us have a look at them.

- First, as has often been noted, **(fictional) nonexistent objects are occasionally *inconsistent***. Quine's example in *On What There Is* is "the round square cupola of Berkeley College". But one doesn't even need to coin *ad hoc* descriptions: sometimes fictional entities are characterized inconsistently by the actual stories in which they appear.

- Now and then the inconsistency may be unintentional. For instance, in one of Conan Doyle's stories, *The Sign of the Four*, we are told that Watson limps because of a war wound at his leg; in *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson's wound is not on his leg, but on his shoulder, and Watson does not limp. One may claim that what Doyle described, despite his own intentions, were *two* different Watsons, one who limps, the other who doesn't. However, the inconsistent author's say-so sometimes does not appear to be appropriately overridden by a semantic treatment that (as suggested by David Lewis [1978], "Truth in Fiction", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, pp. 37-46) *explains away* the inconsistency.

- Suppose we write a novel, and in its first chapter we have the Mad Mathematician produce a round square. If the intentional inconsistency is excised, the fact that mathematicians all over the world are amazed by this result in the second chapter becomes unexplainable. Given such "incorrigible" inconsistencies, it seems that **the UCP forces us to admit not only possible objects, but also impossible ones**, in the strict sense of objects that violate the Law of Non-Contradiction.

- Second, if the UCP held generally for any condition, **one could run an "ontological argument" to prove the existence of anything**. For instance, one may consider the following set of properties:

{goldenness, mountainhood, existence},

that is, one may pick the condition $\alpha[x]$ = "*x* is golden $\wedge$ *x* is a mountain $\wedge$ *x* exists". Now existence is a perfectly normal first-order property for Meinongians, so the UCP would give us, completely *a priori*, an existent golden mountain. This cannot be.

- It seems, therefore, that we have to **restrict the class of conditions $\alpha[x]$ that may be used to characterize objects**: only some (sets of) predicates will give us the corresponding objects. *The* main problem of Meinongianism is: which ones?