On How Things Are

1. Textbook Quineanism

To be is to be the value of a bound variable, or so we have been taught. Existential commitment comes via quantification, and in order to commit ourselves to the existence of some object or another, we must quantify over it. As a result, so long as we are careful to avoid quantifying into a predicate position — that is, so long as we are careful to avoid the murky depths of second-order logic — we need not believe in the existence of things that serve as the semantic values of predicates. So long as we don’t quantify over predicate-like things, we don’t have to believe there are any.

Introduce a second-order quantifier into your system, though, and you bloat your ontology with sets at best and spooky Platonic abstracta at worst.

Or so we have been taught. I think, however, that we have not been taught aright. Our schooling in this matter, which seems to have been accepted by many (although surely not all) who have received it, consists of three main claims. As a package, we might call these claims “textbook Quineanism”:

(SO) Ontology is a serious business, continuous with science.

(QC) Quantification is the hallmark of ontological commitment.

(PI) Using a predicate does not commit us to any corresponding predicate-like entity.
I do not claim that “textbook Quineanism” is exactly what is argued for in On What There Is, or even that it is Quine’s considered view. I am not come to exegete Quine, but to criticize the principles commonly bandied about in his name; as the above triad seems to best capture these principles, it seems to best deserve my consideration.

According to the doctrine of serious ontology (SO), there are right and wrong answers about what exists — answers whose rightness or wrongness is determined by language-independent facts about how the world is.\(^1\) Traditionally, those who have rejected textbook Quineanism have done so by rejecting this doctrine, opting instead for a deflationary view of ontology on which ontological questions either merely ask how we use language or don’t make any sense at all.\(^2\)

My complaint is not with serious ontology. On the contrary, I think Quine was entirely right on this count. Rather, as someone who takes ontology to be serious business indeed, I object to a particular consequence of the twin doctrines of quantificational commitment (QC) and predicate innocence (PI): using a predicate is ontologically innocent — such uses don’t commit us to predicate-like entities — whereas quantification into predicate position, and thus second-order logic generally, is not. This asymmetry is unwarranted and unwanted; and, as I will argue, it should be rejected along with the doctrine that gave rise to it. I hold the doctrine of quantificational commitment to be the source of the objectionable asymmetry: ontological commitment stems not from the particularity or generality of the term, but rather from the use to which the term has been put. Second-order quantification may commit us to predicate-like entities, but only if uses of predicates do so as well.

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\(^1\) Of course, if the answers are couched in a language, then facts about how that language works will be part of the story as to why they are right; but SO denies that they are the whole story, or even the most interesting part of the whole story.

\(^2\) Rudolf Carnap (1950) is probably the historically most famous foe of both textbook Quineanism and SO. There have been a few recent exceptions to the general trend, though: George Boolos (1985), Augustin Rayo and Stephen Yablo (2001), and Timothy Williamson (2003) have all expressed dissatisfaction with elements of textbook Quineanism other than SO.
2. Quantificational Commitment

I presented QC as a slogan rather than a doctrine. Let’s be a bit more precise about it. It is intended as an answer to a particular sort of question: “When does using a sentence $\phi$ commit us to entities of a certain type?” And the answer it endorses is: “When $\phi$ contains a bound variable, $\alpha$, where $\alpha$ must have assignments to entities of the given type in order for $\phi$ to be true.”\(^3\)

It should be trivial that being the value of a bound variable is sufficient for being. If our variables must range over some objects in order for our sentences to be true, our sentences commit us to those objects. This follows from the fact that the question “What does using $\phi$ ontologically commit us to?” is always straightforwardly answerable with “Whatever must exist in order for $\phi$ to be true.”\(^4\)

QC enriches this answer by insisting that quantification is necessary for ontological commitment. By its lights, if an object $u$ doesn’t help $\phi$ be true by getting assigned to one of its variables, then $\phi$ doesn’t commit us to $u$ at all. QC grants that $\phi$ commits us to whatever has to exist in order for it to be true, but then asks the more penetrating question, “For a given sentence $\phi$, what has to exist in order for it to be true?” and answers, “Nothing but values for its variables.”

\(^3\)We should note that the criterion is in effect only when we are committed to the strict and literal truth of the sentence in question. I may say, “Professor so-and-so gives me the creeps,” but so long as I am willing to deny the literal truth of this sentence and settle instead for “Professor so-and-so makes me uncomfortable,” I need not be taken as being committed to the existence of creeps.

\(^4\)I think this is not quite right. Perhaps we will discover that sentences can be true only when they expresses propositions which are true. In this case, for any sentence to be true, a true proposition must exist. But it is not clear that we should take any utterance of a sentence as committing the utterer to the existence of propositions. Perhaps a better answer would be, “Whatever competent language users recognize must exist in order for $\phi$ to be true.” Unfortunately, I lack the space to pursue the matter further here.
3. Names

Since QC holds that we can commit ourselves to objects only by quantifying over them, it must deny that simply using a name commits us to any sort of referent for that name. As Quine puts it, “names are altogether immaterial to the ontological issue,” (1948, p. 12). But this appears patently false.

Consider a philosopher, Janus, who denies the existence of God. “There is no God,” he says. “Nothing is identical to God.” On the other hand, Janus says a lot of things an atheist shouldn’t go around saying. “God is good, great, and wise,” he claims. “God created the universe; God is the most powerful being that exists. I’m counting on God to save my immortal soul.” And so on.

Janus will agree, in fact, with everything a theist says, so long as quantification over any sort of god is left out. If a theist says “Everything owes its existence to God,” Janus will agree. And whenever a theist makes a statement that everything is F or that something is G, Janus will say instead that everything is F and God is F, or that either something is G or God is G. He will even make the metalinguistic assertion that “God” refers to God, although, of course, he will deny that “God” refers to anything.

For all his effort in avoiding quantifying over God, has Janus really avoided ontological commitment to deity? Common sense suggests not. At best, Janus is a regular theist trying, but failing, to avoid being so-called through a mere technicality of the Quinean law. At worst, he is incoherent, contradicting himself whenever he says, in the same breath, that God fills the role of unique supreme being and nothing fills the role of unique supreme being.

If we are to follow the textbook, Quineanism has no way to tell Janus what he ought to be told: that he is as much a theist as Acquinas himself. Of course, a good

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5Janus takes “God” to be a proper name for a deity and not, as it were, a job title.
Quinean might object that Janus’s use of proper names is illicit. On Quine’s preferred language, there were no ("logically") proper names — all apparent names were merely disguised descriptions, quantifiers incognito. On such a language, Janus is really saying that there is a unique thing that Gods, and that it will save his immortal soul. And, of course, this directly contradicts his claim that nothing will save his immortal soul.

Janus resists. “I’m no semantic descriptivist about names,” he insists. “When I say that God will save my immortal soul, I am determinedly not saying that the unique Godder will save my immortal soul. While I affirm the first claim, I emphatically deny the second.”

The Quinean might stick to her guns and insist that, since names are descriptions, Janus’s speech drives him into inconsistency. She could say that Janus’s false linguistic theory leads him into contradictions: although he thinks he is saying something different when he uses the name “God” than he is when he talks about “the unique Godder,” he is not, so he ends up saying both that the unique Godder will and will not save his soul.

But even if she is correct — even if the names Janus has been using really are disguised descriptions — her point is orthogonal to the debate about ontological commitment. Whether alleged names are covert quantifiers is a matter for linguistics, not ontology, and a criterion of ontological commitment ought not presuppose one answer over another. We can rightly demand that our criterion tell us what commitments are incurred by speakers of languages with non-descriptive names, even if it turns out that our own language is not among them.

For his part, Janus is not worried. He is fully prepared, if the need should arise, to retreat to a language of his own devising which does tolerate proper names, and report his beliefs in that language. But we should be worried on his behalf; for,
as ought to be apparent, this maneuver will not help him escape the commitment to a God he is so keen to avoid.

4. Name Position and Subject Position

So textbook Quineanism is mistaken. It has left open a loophole that ought to be closed. A committed Quinean, however, will be quick to point out that the hole requires only a small amount of plaster; in addition to the three textbook doctrines already discussed, Quineanism may adopt a fourth, that of ontologically loaded names:

\[(\text{LN}) \text{ Names engender ontological commitment.}\]

We ought to ask ourselves, though, what sort of picture of ontological commitment this revised Quineanism paints. Quantification commits, and names commit; are these two independent facts, or is there some underlying principle that could explain why both “God is good” and “Something is good” commit us to the existence of at least one thing?

Here is one picture of ontological commitment: there is something special about quantification, and thanks to that special something, whenever we use a bound variable, we commit ourselves ontologically. There is also some other special feature of names, thanks to which, whenever we use a name, we commit ourselves to its

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\[6\text{Some will balk, recalling that Quine was driven to his doctrine by the thorny problems of “negative existentials”: since I use the name “Santa” when I say “Santa doesn’t exist,” do I thereby commit myself to Santa’s existence in the very act of denying it? The answer depends on the semantics of empty names. LN, however, may be interpreted either as the claim that every use of a name commits, or instead the claim that only certain uses do. Which uses? At a minimum those that in some sense “ascribe” something to the referent of the name — roughly, those which, according to a negative free logic, must be false when the name is empty. Which way LN ought to be interpreted is something I leave up to the philosophers of language.}\]
referent. Language contains two fundamental and fundamentally disparate ways to commit ourselves to things: names and quantifiers.

Here is another picture: there is just one special feature of language that allows us to commit ourselves to things — its intensionality, its ability to be about things. Names commit us to their referents simply because we use these names to talk about these referents. If I say “God will save my immortal soul,” I am paradigmatically talking about, or at least trying to talk about, God — some particular thing — and say that it is some particular way. Bound variables commit us to things for precisely the same reason. If I say “Something will save my immortal soul,” I am once again trying to talk about some thing and say that it is a particular way. Admittedly, I am less specific about which thing I am talking about, but even though I perhaps cannot tell the thing I am trying to talk about from its fellows, I am still committed to the existence of something talked about.

The second picture provides a unified, intuitive understanding of ontological commitment. Names and variables commit us ontologically because they take objects as their semantic values. The first picture, by contrast, seems somewhat ad hoc. It is easy enough to see why names commit, but what is the special, fundamentally different feature that forces bound variables to do likewise? If bound variables do not commit by taking things as their semantic values, then how do they? What is it about variability that requires that there be objects? What does generality have to do with existence? The first picture makes the ontological significance of bound variables an utter mystery.

If I am right, the traditional emphasis on quantification as a hallmark of commitment is mistaken. A bound variable does not commit us to its required values simply because it’s a variable; rather, it commits us to these values because it’s been put in the name position of a sentence and used to talk about things. Names and
variables commit us ontologically under the same conditions and for fundamentally the same reason: they are both used to single out an object (or some objects) that we want to say something about. We can use either names or variables to do the singling, but either way we quietly admit that the object in question exists.

The lesson we ought to learn is that ontological commitment is not tied to the sort of term used (variable or constant) but rather to the sort of work that the term is put to. Variables, at least of the first order, and names are paradigmatically used to refer, either constantly or under an assignment, to subjects for predication. But whenever we predicate, we must predicate of a thing; so variables and names paradigmatically require there to be things of which we predicate. Whether we’ve used a variable or a name has got nothing to do with it; we commit ourselves ontologically when we put terms in a subject position. To be is to be the value of a subject term.

5. Predicate Innocence and Second-Order Logic

Once we have divorced ontological commitment from quantification we no longer need to tow the traditional line regarding second-order logic. Textbook Quineanism holds that quantification second-order — that is, quantification into subject position — commits us to predicate-like entities. For instance, on the textbook view, if I accept the sentence “\( \exists x \exists Y(Y(x)) \),” I tacitly admit that there is some predicate-like entity \( Y \) and some other entity \( x \) which “instantiates” (or is otherwise appropriately connected with) \( Y \). This is supposed to be a consequence of QC: I quantify into predicate position, so I must quantify over something predicate-like.\(^7\)

\(^{7}\)In some versions of textbook Quineanism, all statements must be translated into first-order ones before commitments can be evaluated. But if anyone thought that second-order logic was at least as ontologically innocent as first-order, such a requirement would be apparently unmotivated. So I take it that the demand for first-orderization of ontological claims stems from a prior belief that
As we’ve just seen, the ontologically committing character of first-order variables stems from their roles in their respective sentences rather than from their variability. They commit because they are put in subject position and subject positions commit. So whether or not second-order variables engender ontological commitments ought to depend on whether the positions into which those variables are put — namely, predicate positions — are positions that commit as well.

But it is a fundamental tenet of textbook Quineanism that these positions do not ontologically commit, because it is a fundamental tenet that predicates are ontologically innocent (PI). When I say “Some dogs are brown,” I commit myself both to the existence of dogs and to the existence of brown things. But (says the Quinean) I don’t also commit myself to a predicate-like object, brownness, which is somehow singled out by my use of “brown.” Saying that some dogs are brown is saying of some things that they are a certain way; but it’s not saying that there is a further thing with which this certain way is identical.\(^8\)

Quantification into subject place is ontologically committing thanks to the nature of subjects, not the nature of quantification. So if quantification into predicate position is ontologically committing, then it ought to be so thanks to something about the nature of predicates. Yet textbook Quineanism cannot allow that there is anything in the nature of predicates that would make quantification into that locus of ontological import. So what reason do we have for thinking there is anything ontologically problematic about this sort of quantification?

Let’s dispense with some bad reasons right away. First, it will be hard to shake the feeling that second-order quantification is up to no good if we carelessly quantified is not innocent.

\(^8\)This isn’t to say that “brown” doesn’t commit us. It does commit us, but the commitment isn’t ontological — it’s qualitative. It commits us to things being certain ways. Saying that some things are brown commits me qualitatively to brown things. But it doesn’t commit me ontologically to redness. I will not be so careful in the text, though, using “commit” and its cognates for “ontologically commit” throughout.
parse formal second-order sentences into first-order English. We must resist the temptation to read “∃X(X(a,b))” as “There exists an X such that a bears X to b.” If we read it instead as “a is somehow X related to b,” we will not feel any pressure from ordinary language to brand second-order logic as ontologically extravagant.\(^9\)

Second, if we insist that metalanguages for second-order object languages themselves quantify only first-order we will view second-order quantification with suspicion. Timothy Williamson (2003, pp. 444–445) insists that, if we take second-order quantification as a serious phenomenon in its own right, we must not ask what the variables range over. If second-order quantifiers are ontologically innocent, then they don’t range over any thing at all. That’s not the right way to think about what they’re doing. It’s trying to treat a second-order quantifier like a first-order quantifier. We ought, rather, as George Boolos (1985) does with plurals, use second-order quantification in the metalanguage to give truth-conditions of second-order quantification in the object language.

Having dismissed bad reasons for saddling second-order quantifiers with ontological heft, are there any good ones left? I can think of two. First, should we decide to reject the doctrine of predicate innocence, we will find it expedient to reject any doctrine that suggests second-order quantification is innocent as well. If for some reason we decide that simply saying “Fido is brown” commits us to a thing, brownness, which Fido is, then saying “Fido is somehow colored” should likewise commit us to a thing which Fido is. I have argued only that commitments are tied to a term’s position; should good arguments lead us to think that predicate position is committing, then it will be so whether filled by constant or variable.

Second, if we predicate third-order of our second-order variables, we should

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\(^9\)See Rayo and Yablo 2001, §9 for a more thorough discussion. They also note that fluid English translations of second-order sentences are somehow easier to come by when the predicate is polyadic. This, however, is no evidence that formal second-order monadic variables are somehow untoward, but rather that English is (slightly) impoverished.
perhaps think those variables commit us as well. When a third-order term operates on a second-order variable, the variable acts not as a predicate but as a subject term — and subject terms commit. But, of course, if the language has second-order constants and admits of third-order predication, the latter probably won’t be limited to variables.¹⁰ And whenever a third-order predicate takes a second-order argument, we will need to think of that argument as a subject and therefore as ontologically significant, its constancy or variability notwithstanding. So although third-order predication may give us reason to think that second-order terms have ontological weight, it gives us no reason to think that variables are any heavier, ontologically speaking, than their constant counterparts.¹¹

6. An Objection

When I present my argument against Textbook Quineanism, I am often told that Janus is speaking a language governed by free-logical rules. (Positive free logics are so-called because they allow names to be “free” of ontological commitment: empty names can appear in meaningful, true sentences.) So his claims are true, and thus his case does not press us towards LN. But if we need not accept LN, there is no reason to think QC isn’t as unified and intuitive a criterion of commitment as we might ever need.

How does a free logic free names from ontological significance? Here’s one way

¹⁰If we allow second-order variables but not predicates to take third-level predicates, we will have to give up on, for instance, second-order universal instantiation: “∃X(F(X) & X(a))” won’t imply “F(P) & P(a)),” since the latter involves the forbidden third-level predicate attaching to a second-level predicate.

¹¹Of course, as with ordinary, first-order sentences, we are committed only by sentences which we are unwilling to paraphrase away. If all I mean by “red is my favorite color” is that I like most red things more than most non-red things, then I haven’t really predicated anything of redness at all. Likewise, if whatever I mean by “some color is my favorite” is that “Some things are somehow colored, and I tend to like things which are so colored more than ones which are not so colored,” my second-order variable is not ontologically problematic.
it can be done. Start with a model that assigns elements of its domain to some, but not all, names in the language. This model represents the way the world really is. We can “expand” this base model to a larger one on which all names are assigned, if we wish: we add some more things to the domain, assign the previously unassigned names to these things, and maybe throw these newcomers into a few extensions. Call this model an expansion of the base model.\textsuperscript{12} Then we evaluate sentences with empty singular terms so that they count as true if and only if they are true on every expansion of the base model, false if false on every expansion of the base model, and truth-valueless otherwise. But we only allow variables to ever take as values things in the domain of the base model, so no sentence with a bound variable will ever be true unless its variables are assigned to things in the base model (things that exist, that is).\textsuperscript{13,14}

I take it that those who would appeal to positive free logic in order to defend Quineanism think that a sentence commits us ontologically just to whatever needs to be in the base model in order for the sentence to be true. But we might wonder why the move to positive free logic does not license a further move to Meinongian quantification. We may mimic the formal apparatus of the positive free logic by considering expansions of a base model but holding any sentence to be true if it is

\textsuperscript{12}More precisely: where \((D, I)\) is a model and not every singular term is defined on \(I\), let an expansion of \((D, I)\) be a model \(\langle D', I'\rangle\) where (i) \(D \subseteq D'\); (ii) for every singular term \(\alpha\), \(I'(\alpha)\) is defined and \(I'(\alpha) = I(\alpha)\) if the latter is defined; (iii) for every predicate \(\Pi\), \(I(\Pi) \subseteq I'(\Pi)\); and (iv) for every predicate \(\Pi\) and object or \(n\)-tuple of objects \(x\), if \(x \in I'(\Pi)\) and \(x \notin I(\Pi)\), then \(x \in D' - D\) (if \(x\) is an object) or there is a \(y \in x\) where \(y \in D' - D\) (if \(x\) is an \(n\)-tuple). The idea is that the extension of an expansion’s predicates can only differ from those in the base model with respect to the “new” objects in the expansion.

\textsuperscript{13}See van Fraassen 1967; Bencivenga 1980 for a serious development of this supervaluationist approach to positive free logics.

\textsuperscript{14}This isn’t quite enough to get Janus what he wants: “God will save my immortal soul” will not come out true, because there will be expansions of the base model where the thing that gets assigned to “God” does not also get assigned to the extension of “saves Janus’s immortal soul.” We can fix this by supposing there is some set of sentences — perhaps somehow analytic to various singular terms — that must also be true on every expansion of the base model. If “God saves Janus’s immortal soul” is on that list, then every expansion where the denotation of “God” does not appear in the extension of “saves Janus’s immortal soul” will be ruled out.
true on every expansion of the base model, false if false on every expansion of the base model, and truth-valueless otherwise. Just drop the bit about variables only getting assigned to objects in the base domain. On such a semantics, both “God will save Janus’s immortal soul” and “Something will save Janus’s immortal soul” may come out true, even if God is not in the base domain — that is, even if God doesn’t “really” exist.

I take it that a Quinean who appeals to free logic owes us an explanation of why a free-logical semantics is unobjectionable but a semantics for Meinongian quantification is not. Such a Quinean will naturally want to appeal to something about our intuitions as native speakers to rule out Meinongian quantification: “What, you think something’s going to save my immortal soul even though nothing exists that will save my immortal soul? That’s crazy!” Such a thrust cuts both ways, though, for intuitions as native speakers are equally resistant to a free-logical interpretation of Janus’s speech: “What, you think God will save my immortal soul but nothing will save my immortal soul?” Both claims are equally implausible.

We cannot decide which logic is the logic of ontology until we have already decided what the proper account of ontological commitment is. There are sets enough to go around; we cannot expect a dearth of available model-able logics to select just one to be the logic of ontology. In this case, though, an appeal to free logic is out of place; we can allow Janus’s speech to be underwritten by free logic only if we have independent reason to think that bound variables commit and names do not. Deciding the ontological weight of various terms must be taken care of first, and we take care of it, presumably, by considering our intuitions as language users. Our intuitions insist that Janus’s use of “God” is sufficient for his being committed to the existence of a God. If a free logic goes against this intuition, so much the worse for free logic as the logic of ontology.
7. Conclusion

The problem with textbook Quineanism is less that it saddles second-order variables with unwarranted commitments and more that it posits an unwarranted asymmetry between the commitments of second-order variables and the predicates that serve as their instances. The difference between second-order variables and predicates is one of specificity and generality, not one of entity and attribute. In order for them to have different ontological significance, the specific/general distinction would have to be the one most critical to ontological matters. But, as should be plain, it is not.

Textbook Quineanism errs by misdiagnosing the ontological import of first-order variables as stemming from their variability rather than from their position, thus giving import to the wrong distinction. The error is easily seen if we consider odd philosophers like Janus who try, and fail, to exploit it to their ontological advantage. It is a nominal’s status as a subject, not as a variable, that dictates its commitments. It is the name position, not the quantifier, that keeps the gate of ontological commitment, and the time has come to give him his due.

References


