

Was Meinong Right About Negative Existentials?

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Introduction

This paper explores Quine's solution to the problem of negative existentials. First, Russell's theory of descriptions shall be explained as an original solution to this problem. Next, it will be explained how Quine utilizes Russell's theory and expands it to apply to all singular terms within a language. Finally, it shall be demonstrated that Quine's solution is not a descriptive solution, but a normative solution. As such, to argue against the plausibility of his solution involves disputing his normative methodological considerations. The paper shall conclude by explaining the pros and cons of a modified Quinean solution against the solution he objects to in "On What There Is".

The Problem of Negative Existentials

To understand the problem of negative existentials, one must understand the principles that govern the theories of meaning employed by philosophers like Frege, Russell, and Quine. The problem arises due to an inherent tension among these principles. The first principle is that of compositionality:

[ComP] If two expressions have the same reference, then substitution of one for the other in a third expression does not change its reference¹.

In [ComP], 'expressions' refers to both individual syntactic units like words, as well as complete expressions like sentences. Thus, the substitution of a word *x* in a sentence *S* with an equivalent reference results in no change to the meaning of neither the word nor the sentence. This relies on a further assumption surrounding the foundation of meaning:

[ToM] Meaning consists wholly in the reference of expressions.

If [ToM] is true, then one can derive two further principles:

¹ Zoltán Gendler Szabó, *Problems of Compositionality* (Routledge, 2013), 7.

[ToM-W] The meaning of a word consists in its ontological correlate.

[ToM-S] The meaning of a sentence consists in its truth-value².

From these principles one can derive an absurd conclusion. Consider a sentence of the following form: 'There does not exist an object x.' If, as [ComP] states, the meaning of a sentence is determined by the references of its constituent parts, then the referent of 'x' will provide meaning to the sentence in which it is contained, thus providing the truth-value to the sentence. If no constituents in the sentence have a reference, then the sentence cannot have meaning and (by [ToM-S]) cannot have a truth-value. This is *prima facie* incorrect: a rational agent would not believe that a sentence of this form has no truth-value, let alone has no meaning.

The problem then becomes how one avoids this undesirable absurdity while retaining the principles one deems as intuitively correct for all other cases.

Russell's Solution: The Theory of Descriptions

Russell draws attention to a distinction between grammatical form and logical form. He argues that although it may be the case that a certain expression in a sentence serves as the subject (or singular term) grammatically, it need not be the case that it serves as the subject (or singular term) logically. Russell gives an example of the sentence, 'All men [humans] are mortal'. Grammatically, 'all men' serves as the subject of this sentence; however, to determine the truth-value of this sentence, one must derive its logical form. Thus, he argues the correct logical form is: 'If x is human, then x is mortal'³. Therefore, the subject is no longer 'all men', but is instead the variable x whose domain ranges over all possible objects in the world.

Drawing attention to the distinction between grammatical and logical form, Russell argues that one can dissolve the problem of negative existentials. In such sentences, though an expression may serve grammatically as subject, it does not do so in its logical form. The sentence, 'There does not exist an object x', has

² The justification of this assumption is outside the scope of this paper; however, for justifications, see: Gottlob Frege, "On Concept and Object," in B. McGuinness ed., *Collected Papers on Mathematics, Logic, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 193.

³ Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind* 14, no. 56 (1905): 480.

a logical form that does not treat the object under consideration as the singular term. Suppose the object under consideration is 'Pegasus'. The logical form of the sentence, 'There does not exist a Pegasus', would have the following logical form^{4, 5}:

$$\sim(\exists x)[(Pegasus(x) \wedge (\forall y)(Pegasus(y) \Rightarrow x = y))]$$

Thus, as in the universal quantifier example above, the subject of this sentence is the variable x that ranges over all objects in the domain under consideration (the external world for Russell).

Understanding negative existentials as having this logical form entails that the truth of such a sentence is no longer dependent on the reference of some singular-term 'Pegasus', but rather, upon the existence of some object x that is contained under the concept of 'Pegasus'. Therefore, one can hold the stated principles without deriving the problem of negative existentials.

Quine's Adoption

The analysis posed in the introduction of "How does Quine solve the problem of negative existentials" is, strictly speaking, a nonsensical question. Unlike Russell, Quine seems to reject [ComP]: "[...] truth values seem to attach to singular statement only conditionally upon existence of the named object... there would seem, under ordinary usage, to be no way of adjudicating the truth values of 'Pegasus flies' and '~Pegasus flies'; the nonexistence of Pegasus seems to dispose of the question without answering it."⁶ This position is the same as Gottlob Frege's⁷. Despite (as shall be shown) adopting the Theory of Descriptions and, in a sense, providing a 'solution' to the problem of negative existentials, this is simply an unintended by-product of a larger intent: to advance a normative program of eliminating singular terms from one's language⁸. This normative component will be crucial in the

4 Sentences of this form are called 'definitive descriptions'.

5 It should be noted that, strictly speaking, the usage of 'exist' as a predicate is not possible for Russell's system of philosophy. He proposes the principle of acquaintance to avoid the issues that come with admitting a concept like 'existence'. For simplicity's sake, and because it has no impact on the thesis of this paper, I ignore this issue.

6 Lenny Clapp, Marga Reimer, and Anne Spire, "Negative Existentials," in Jeanette Gundel and Barbara Abbott ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Reference* (Oxford University Press, 2019): 13; W. V. Quine, "Meaning and Inference" in *From a Logical Point of View: Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Harper & Row, 1963), 165.

7 Michael Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Harper & Row, 1973), 185.

8 The normative component of Quine, especially his naturalized is epistemology, is acknowledged by himself: W. V. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 19-20; Lenny Clapp, Marga Reimer, and Anne Spire, "Negative Existentials," in Jeanette Gundel and

objection posed to Quine's 'solution' at the end of this paper.

Having acknowledged the nature of Quine's motivations, one can now see that his solution is indirect at best, but that it can be loosely considered a solution with qualifications. A brief historical exposition will serve to provide a clearer picture of Quine's motivations in the elimination of singular terms.
 Quine Against Meinong or Wyman

In "On What There Is," Quine engages with an imagined interlocutor by the name of "Wyman." This interlocutor is meant to represent the thoughts of Meinong, who famously drew a distinction between existing and real objects. Meinong held that, though something may not be 'real', it can still be present within one's conceptual scheme by 'existing'⁹. Thus, though no real object is a 'gold mountain', an object falling under the concepts 'goldenness' and 'mountainhood' still 'exists'. According to Meinong, to reject this is to be "prejudice[d] in favor of the actual."¹⁰ Meinong's motivation in proposing his "jungle" is to provide an ontology that meets the natural intuition that every thought has a corresponding object associated with it¹¹. This also provides a solution to the problem of negative existentials: the 'unreal objects' may not be 'real', but they are still able to be referents of sentences in virtue of their existence in one's ontology.

Quine proposes multiple arguments against this perspective; however, most are ultimately unsuccessful because they beg the question against Meinong. For example, Quine argues that Meinong's jungle entails that there must exist contradictory objects. If every conceivable combination of properties has a corresponding entity (existing or not), then there are naturally logically-contradictory objects: "Can we drive Wyman now to

Barbara Abbott ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Reference* (Oxford University Press, 2019): 13-4.

9 There are, of course, multiple ways to formulate this view. This formulation differs from Quine's in "On What Matters"; however, I believe this formulation is simpler for the paper and it in no way changes Quine's motivations or arguments against the Meinongian view.

10 Terence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects* (Yale University Press, 1980), 18; A. Meinong, "The Theory of Objects," in R. Chisholm ed. *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology* (New York: Free Press, 1960).

11 Though outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that this follows from Meinong's adoption of Brentano and Husserl's notion of intentionality: the thoughts in a rational agent's mind have a certain relationship with the external world wherein all thoughts are targeted towards an object. To make sense of this intentionality, there must be some object thought about.

admitting a realm of unactualized possibilities?¹² This might strike Quine as absurd *prima facie*; however, Meinong has no qualms with such a result:

Naturally I cannot in any way evade this consequence: whoever once has dealings with a round square will not be able to stop when faced with a square or some other sort of object which is simultaneously round and not round. But one will also, as far as I can see, have weighty reasons hereupon to take the initiative: the principle of contradiction is to be applied by no one to anything other than to reality and possibility^{13, 14}.

Thus, Quine's objections to Meinong cannot be posed without begging the question against Meinong; the conclusions deemed absurd by Quine are not deemed absurd by Meinong and followers, and Quine gives no reason why such a position is absurd.

Similarly, Quine argues that Wyman's usage of 'exist' is unfair: it merely pushes the problem of negative existentials back a step. Yet, having clearly recognized the distinction between 'exist' and 'real', one can recognize that this does actually solve the problem as properly constructed. Meinong's proposal would only be inadequate if he argued that existing, unreal entities were not capable of functioning as referents to singular terms as stipulated by [ComP]. Yet, as stated, this is not an absurdity for Meinong: the entire motivation of such a broad, rich ontology is to provide such unreal entities the ability to function as the ontological correlates of such singular terms.

As such, these objections against Wyman (Meinong) are ruled question-begging. The primary question then becomes: why prefer Quine's solution to Meinong's?

Quine's Solution

Quine adopts Russell's Theory of Descriptions and broadens its scope. Rather than treating only non-referring singular terms as functioning as definite descriptions, he argues that all singular terms within a language function this way. His reasons

12 W. V. Quine, "On What There Is" in *From a Logical Point of View: Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Harper & Row, 1963), 4.

13 Terence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects* (Yale University Press, 1980), 31.

14 I take for granted this reading is correct. There do exist other interpretations of Meinong that do not entail this conclusion. See: *ibid*.

for doing so rest on methodological principles like economy and Ockham's razor. He wishes to reduce the cardinality of the set of all existing objects in one's ontology¹⁵. By treating all singular terms as definitive descriptions, one no longer needs to hold that all such terms have a unique ontological correlation that exists in the world. This would greatly reduce the number of entities contained within an ontological framework.

Quine's Solution vs. Meinong's Solution

Having established that Quine's objections are inadequate against Meinong's presuppositions, one must inquire as to the undesirability of these presuppositions. At the heart of Quine's philosophy is a vehement adherence to Ockham's razor: to minimize both the number of kinds of entities, as well as the number of individual entities within a given kind¹⁶. Assuming Ockham's razor is a desirable methodological principle, one can press Meinong on the fact that it violates this principle. Yet, one must also recognize some glaring flaws with Quine's own solution.

First, Quine's solution does not seem to provide a clear method of revealing the logical form of sentences that contain indexicals ('I', 'this', 'my', 'there', etc.). Thus, how does one reveal the logical form of 'This cup is red'? Quine's speculative solution is radically inadequate: it rests on translating 'this' into 'there', which is still an indexical preposition¹⁷. It is outside the scope of this paper to consider if there is some other way to correct this deficiency, but it is certain that Quine never provided any solution of his own.

Secondly, it is unclear how one is to translate a singular term into a definite description. For example, take the proper name 'Aristotle'. What definite description would correspond to this proper name? One possible answer would be 'The student of Plato'. However, this is still quite ambiguous: there have been multiple students of Plato. Perhaps instead one gives the description 'Writer of Nichomachean Ethics'. If meaning is inherently tied to understanding the references of expressions, as Quine thinks it is, can someone mean the

15 W. V. Quine, "On Simple Theories of a Complex World," in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (Random House, 1966), 242.

16 Ibid.

17 W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (The M.I.T. Press, 1960), 163; Lenny Clapp, Marga Reimer, and Anne Spire, "Negative Existentials," in Jeanette Gundel and Barbara Abbott ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Reference* (Oxford University Press, 2019): 12-3.

referent of 'Aristotle' even if they are not aware of one of the unique definite descriptions of him and instead know only the ambiguous description 'The student of Plato'¹⁸?

The strongest objection to Quine, as noted by Clapp, Reimer, and Spire, is that the interpretation of singular terms all being definite descriptions is explanatorily inadequate¹⁹. When one asserts 'The sun is hot', it is unintuitive to suggest that one is actually asserting 'There exists an arbitrary object such that it is a sun, and any other arbitrary object that is a sun is the first arbitrary object, and it is hot'. Russell's solution seems to work in part because it is explanatorily adequate: it is not unintuitive to suggest unreal entities are spoken of in this manner. To extend this translation to all singular objects seems absurd.

Yet, crucially, Quine would agree; descriptively, his theory is bunk. However, this is of no concern because Quine's project here is prescriptive and normative and not descriptive: Quine is not interested in why we judge some occurrences of negative existentials to be true; rather, Quine is proposing a revision of natural language which will enable us to discuss the ontological question of what there is without having to face the problem of negative existentials²⁰.

This is why it was stated that Quine's solution is not really a solution at all in the original sense of the question. It is not a descriptive solution; however, it is a solution that could work if a group of language users adopted it as a true reflection of human thought while providing utterances containing singular terms.

With this crucial qualification in mind, I suggest we create a new position that encompasses Russell's solution in the form of the Theory of Descriptions, with the normative principles Quine utilizes (question-beggingly) in his objections to Meinong. Thus, we abandon Quine's conception of eliminating singular terms altogether and restrict ourselves to merely unreal objects; yet, we make as our primary motivation Ockham's razor as Quine does (and arguably as Russell does too). We shall call this

¹⁸ Problems like these have motivated many philosophers to abandon a descriptive theory of proper names and to adopt Kripke's causal theory. It is of course possible to provide many amendments to answer the objection posed; however, the thrust is clear. Any response requires weakening Quine's original thesis.

¹⁹ Ibid., 13.

²⁰ Ibid., 14.

worldview Quine2.

It should be noted that there can be no resolution in this paper; a methodological dispute takes far greater than eight pages, and there can be no clear decider between Meinong's and Quine2's solutions. In conclusion, all that can be provided is a summary of what each view entails. It is up to the individual philosopher to determine which normative considerations are considered more valuable.

Meinong's solution works: no contradictions arise on the presuppositions that are adopted. Such presuppositions, however, may be seen as undesirable by other philosophers. These include: an extremely expanded, though powerful, ontology; a commitment to the existence of logically contradictory entities; and, arguably, a departure from common-sense thought on the usage of 'existence'.

Quine2's solution arguably does not work: there are multiple objections that must be resolved before one can definitely say that it does. These include the problems of indexicals (as used in negative existentials), and the problem of ambiguity (as applied to negative existentials), among others not covered in this paper. Its largest benefit is an extremely economical and reduced ontology.

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