

## PROFESSOR QUINE AND REAL CLASSES

JAMES K. FEIBLEMAN

Symbolic logic was committed by its founders to the theory of real classes, but nominalism, which at the time prevailed in other philosophical enterprises, soon reasserted itself in logic. The result was that the theory of real classes was difficult to maintain. This difficulty is best exemplified by the work of Professor Quine, and I propose to show it. Quine early on had the advantage of study with Whitehead, the realist, but it was not easy for a thinker trained in the tradition of nominalism to hold to the recognition of the reality of classes, since such a concept is the very contradictory of the nominalistic notion of their unreality. Frege had signalled a change from the nominalistic tradition in a return to realism, but Russell and Whitehead working together had difficulty in holding to it. Professor Quine's early work therefore is nominalistic despite the influence on him of the realism of his teacher, Whitehead.

As perhaps we should expect in a book which bears an acknowledgement of discussions with Carnap and which carries an introduction by Whitehead, the question of whether classes are real is somewhat muddy.<sup>1</sup> It could be argued of course that any signs which name anything except material individuals are abstract and to this extent mark an independent domain, in the Platonic sense, thus committing symbolic logic to metaphysical realism. But my concern here is with a more special and explicit involvement. Nothing of the sort is to be found in *A System of Logistic*.

In that early work the reality of classes seems to be assumed but then we find also the conventional principle of extensionality adopted,<sup>2</sup> and a principle which leaves no doubt that the reality resides in members but not in classes. That was in 1934. By 1941 things have cleared up a bit and the reality of classes seems to have asserted itself in Quine's thinking. One has to match the principle of extensionality against the postulation of the

---

1. *A System of Logistic*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts (1934), pp. vii and ix.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 32 and 106.