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THE BEARER OF ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

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The ancient claim that our language commits us directly to ontological doctrines, e.g., 'Abstract entities exist', undergoes a series of modifications in the essays of Professor W. V. Quine. At its most unvarnished the claim appears in these words, *circa* 1947: "Ontological statements follow immediately from all manner of casual statements of commonplace facts".[1] In *Word and Object* (1960) we find this remark: "We cannot paraphrase our (philosopher) opponent's sentences into canonical (quantificational) notation for him and convict him of the consequences, for there is no synonymy. . ."[2] In this paper I would like to notice and comment on some transitional stages between Quine's earlier and later views, keeping two questions in mind: (1) How does the idea of ontological commitment, as it develops in Quine's thought, implicate the user of discourse? (2) In what sense can discourse be said to carry ontological commitment?

I

At one point Quine writes, ". . . when we say that some zoological species are cross-fertile we are committing ourselves to recognizing as entities the several species themselves, abstract though they are".[3] This sentence advances a strong version of the claim. Before noticing how Quine qualifies it, let us imagine a neighbor, Smith, remarking, "I've managed to grow three species of rose in this thin soil". Now whether Smith happens to care or not, his casual statement of fact is burdened, apparently and on the surface at any rate, with at least one problematical consequence. It implies "Species exist". This, I think, is the least that Quine could have meant in his earlier discussions of ontological commitment. Even this strong view, however, gives us no good reason to subpoena Smith himself for overpopulating the universe. As Quine puts it, the criterion of ontological commitment "applies in the first instance to discourse and not to men".[4]

In the same context Quine describes two ways in which "a man may fail to share the ontological commitments of his discourse".[5] To get at the way in which Quine's earlier view implicates the user of discourse, it will help

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to glance at these. The first way involves Smith's talking with his fingers crossed. If Smith is merely reciting the story of Cinderella, for example, he need have no anxiety about the bound variables in what he says. The second way applies where Smith means what he says, as in the example about three species of rose. If it can be shown that Smith's remark is in fact only seemingly committed, in that one can substitute a way of speaking innocent of such commitment, then "the seemingly presupposed objects may justly be said to have been explained away as convenient fictions, manners of speaking".[6] Later in the same essay Quine mentions a third way. He imagines someone "who professes to repudiate universals but still uses without scruple any and all of the discursive apparatus which the most unrestrained of platonists might allow himself".[7] Notice, however, that none of these descriptions can be applied to the example about Smith. First of all, Smith is not story-telling. Next, we suppose, the categories of commitment and innocence as they appear in semantics are dead letters to Smith, who merely uses the words 'three species' as any gardener might. Smith would not be prepared to regard anything in his remark as a convenient fiction, nor could we expect him to declare for or against a doctrine of abstract entities. These disclaimers merely reinforce Quine's assertion that his criterion of commitment applies to discourse, not to men. Smith, as a non-philosopher yet a maker of casual statements, is at most only indirectly related to the kind of ontological commitment Quine is concerned about.

At the same time, this indirect relationship is something. Smith's remark about three species of rose is an instance of discourse, and Smith is directly related to his own discourse even if only indirectly to any ontological commitment it might trail. Let us see whether from all this we can make out the nature of his indirect relationship to the commitment. If we think of discourse in general as the bearer of ontological commitment, it would seem that while Smith is normally prepared to stand up for his statements to the extent of glossing them, explaining how he came to make them, and so on, he is unable to recognize, much less to defend, some consequences which follow immediately from them. Smith's education with regard to what the statement about his garden implies is incomplete. This, it seems to me, introduces a fourth way of failing to share the ontological commitments of one's discourse, namely, by not realizing it has them, or by never having been taught to honor them as logical consequences. Accepting this fourth way as Smith's, we can attempt to characterize his indirect relationship to the commitment in the following manner. *The idea that discourse in general carries ontological commitment qualifies Smith negatively, i.e., as not fully realizing what his statement implies.*

But this way of putting it makes the relationship between Smith and the commitment too direct, for it suggests a deficiency in Smith himself merely for his doing the ordinary in talking about his garden. More light is thrown on Smith's relation to the commitment where Quine speaks of expanding a committed idiom into a new and uncommitted form.[8] This possibility forces us to characterize Smith's relation to the commitment in a modified way:

the idea that discourse in general carries ontological commitment qualifies Smith as not realizing what his statement seemingly, but perhaps not actually, implies. No hint of anything lacking in Smith remains in this characterization. He fades out of the picture without reproach, leaving his statement for others to monitor.

II

As soon as we say this, however, a new problem arises. If Smith fades out of the picture, in what sense does Smith's discourse, which is to say *his* using statements, remain? In other words, if the real carrier of ontological commitment is discourse by and large, then it will be instanced by statements that people actually make. And, as Quine reminds us in another work, ". . . what admit of meaning and of truth and falsity are not the statements but the individual events of their utterance".[9] In this case the event is Smith's telling me about his roses at a particular time and place. If discourse is the carrier, then, any ontological commitment in this example will attach not to the statement in some abstracted sense but to Smith's use of it.

This brings us to the second main question of this paper: in what sense can discourse be said to carry seeming ontological commitment? There is only a partial answer in Quine's remark that such commitments follow immediately from commonplace statements. Taken together with his explicit criterion for deciding ontological commitment, the remark just cited suggests that if we look at Smith's statement (bearing in mind its likeliest quantificational expression, and assuming that Smith is not story-telling) we will be able to see immediately, through its bound variables, the extent of its seeming commitment. This much is clear, but a question is left over. What enables us to say that *Smith's* use of the statement carries seeming ontological commitment? Let us remember that the ability to apply Quine's explicit criterion supposes that we have already made contact with a recognizable something, a suspected carrier of ontological commitment. The suspect, we are allowing, is discourse, and we have picked out Smith's remark as a test case. But if discourse is what concerns us, then it is *his* remarking it that we are concerned about. So I am asking how someone would recognize his use of it as a likely carrier of the commitment.

To make clearer what is meant by Smith's use of it, notice that nothing positive is said about what he does with his statement when we assume merely that he is *not* reciting fiction. Let Smith be ready to take an oath on his statement. Still, when he says it to me, he may positively be doing any of a number of things. Here are a few:

(a) boasting about his green thumb;
(b) deprecating my own gardening skill;
(c) encouraging me to try growing roses;
(d) putting himself forward as a consultant, if only I'll ask for advice;
(e) hinting that I pay him a visit.

For the balance of this discussion let us suppose that all Smith does on this occasion is boast. Then a problem about Quine's explicit criterion develops

along these lines. We have no tradition in semantics for saying that ontological doctrines follow from boasts, hints, deprecations, encouragements, and so on. Semantics rarely calls attention to such language-practices, though they are among the commonest things we do with statements. The problem, accordingly, is that if we do not have a separate criterion for deciding whether someone's *use* of a statement carries seeming ontological commitment, then it might be wrong to suggest, as Quine's earlier essays do, that actual *discourse* is a carrier.

In works of logic one can find a standard precaution which may at first look like an anticipation of our problem, but which cannot be used for that. For example, after observing that meaning and truth belong not to statements in an abstracted sense but to individual events of their utterance, Quine adds: "However, it is a great source of simplification in logical theory to talk of statements in abstraction from the individual occasions of their utterance; and this abstraction, if made in full awareness and subject to a certain precaution, offers no difficulty. The precaution is merely that *we must not apply our logical techniques to examples in which one and the* same statement recurs several times with changed meanings, due to variations in immediate context."[10] In an inference, this passage reminds us, any shift of meaning between two occurrences of a term or statement will affect validity. In logical practice, therefore, we suppose a stable context for any repetitions. Sound as it may be, this precaution is far from permitting us, in investigations of ontological commitment, to consider a statement in abstraction from the circumstances in which it turns up as discourse. For the time being our problem remains.

To sum up, Smith has told me there are three species of rose in his garden. The prelude to his remark and the circumstances of his making it help us to see what he is doing with it. I have characterized his saying it there and then as a boast. Now if it should be suggested that his boasting is what carries a seeming commitment to abstract entities, this would create, I think, a new wrinkle in semantical theory. I do not propose to quarrel with it because to my knowledge no one has ever stood up for it. On the other hand, if an inquirer into ontological commitment (still talking as though discourse were its carrier) were to set aside the fact that Smith is boasting with his statement, and were to search the statement itself for signs of a commitment, then it would appear that the real bearer of such commitment is not discourse but declarative sentences when no one is using them. In this view of the matter, both Smith and his discourse would easily slip the yoke of ontological commitment.

III

Our discussion thus far shows that when Quine speaks of discourse as the bearer of commitment, a person can with some assurance reply, "Not *my* discourse". (In the same way, if the bearer is said to be the *meaning* of a statement, the person can answer, "Not *my* meaning".) This suggests that the discourse Quine refers to is certainly not everyday discourse. In

"Logic and the Reification of Universals" he restricts the claim that commitment attaches to all manner of casual statements. ". . . It is only. . . in reference to one or another part or all of science that we can with full propriety inquire into ontological presuppositions".[11] With this version of the claim, which hails into court neither Smith, nor his discourse, nor scientists, nor theirs, there can be no protest from any of those parties. The real bearer of ontological commitment is not discourse by and large but "scientific discourse painstakingly reformulated in quantificational terms".[12]

Is Quine right in suggesting that ontological doctrines can be gathered from the statements of science quantificationally reformulated? Quine, it seems to me, would be the first to allow that the roots of yea and nay run too deep for any simple answer. On the one side, when we think of the statements of science, Quine's criterion of commitment seems at last to apply to something hard-finished. The theories and findings of science, in their published form at any rate, are comparatively free of crowing, deprecation, and similar byplay. Reference to multiple uses of statements, so easy to make concerning a back-fence conversation, appears to lose all relevance here. The whole function of a scientific statement can easily be imagined to lie in its just being true, or standing for a state of affairs, or describing reality. When we next imagine such a statement re-expressed in quantificational terms, a notation still further removed from the unsurveyable particularity of common discourse, the resulting expression seems to embody the final perfection of symbolizing techniques.

On the other side, such a view as just sketched can easily lead to oversimplifications of 'the language of science' so-called. Here we can notice a difficulty parallel to the one raised by everyday discourse, this time involving scientific discourse as the alleged bearer of ontological commitment. Consider this sentence from the Introduction to Darwin's *The Origin of Species:* "In considering the Origin of Species, it is quite conceivable that a naturalist, reflecting on the mutual affinities of organic beings, on their embryological relations, their geographical distribution, geological succession, and other such facts, might come to the conclusion that species had not been independently created, but had descended, like varieties, from other species." This, I assume, will do as an instance of scientific discourse. Darwin uses this statement first to introduce the idea that mistletoe, woodpeckers, and other organic beings have ancestral lines going back millions of years, with individuals along those lines hardly resembling those we find living today. Secondly, if I read the context correctly, he uses it to disarm a particular kind of opposition. Wishing his theory to be taken as an experimental one all the way, Darwin brings in the idea of gradual speciation as a bare possibility that might occur to someone, and takes upon himself the task of marshalling evidence for it. The point I want to make is that if we suppose Darwin's sentence set over into quantificational notation—a job I leave to others—so that the sentence now wears its ontological commitments on its sleeve, we still have room to ask whether *Darwin's* use of

it carries those commitments. For reasons already brought out, this cannot be decided merely by switching notations and studying the result.

This discussion has taken us through a series of rather disappointing moments, each one, as it gave way to the next, leaving very little to be said for the one before. Smith and his discourse, scientists and theirs, and finally the statements of science quantificationally expressed, by turns shrug off the weight of ontological commitment. If I understand Quine's recent book, *Word and Object*, the real bearers of ontological commitment are, when all is said, ontologists. Quine says, "We cannot paraphrase our (philosopher) opponent's sentences into canonical notation for him and convict him of the consequences, for there is no synonymy. . ."[13] The last quoted clause, as I read it, expresses reaffirmation of his cautionary word, cited earlier, that meanings (including ontological import) attach to particular occasions of utterance, or to what in these pages I have been calling the uses of statements. With this relaxed view of the issue, which implicates no one out of hand, it would be hard, I think, for either ontologists or others to find serious fault.

NOTES

1. *From a Logical Point of View;* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953, p. 10.
2. *Word and Object;* published jointly by The Technology Press of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and John Wiley & Sons, New York and London, 1960, pp. 242-243.
3. *From a Logical Point of View,* p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
5. *Loc. cit.*
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
9. *Methods of Logic;* New York: Henry Holt and Company, revised ed., 1959, p. xvi.
10. *Loc. cit.*
11. *From a Logical Point of View,* p. 106.
12. *Loc. cit.*
13. *Word and Object,* p. 242. Quine's references in this section of his book justify my putting in the word 'philosopher' or 'ontologist'. See pp. 238-243.

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