

# Quine and Plato's Beard Revisited

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## Abstract

To the extent that it allows individuating properties, Quine's answer to the puzzle of saying that Pegasus is not without assuming that Pegasus is is problematic. Alternatively, one might identify the referent of 'Pegasus' in 'Pegasus is not' with an unactualized possible. Yet, Quine's own objection that this compromises *reductio* proof seems to be decisive. So it seems that the best answer is Russell's. Unlike Quine's, it shuns individuating properties with all their attendant difficulties. Unlike Strawson's, it covers the *prima facie* truth of saying that Pegasus does not exist. And unlike Meinong's, it does both without recourse to non-existent particulars.

Dividing meaning and reference in singular terms is Quine's way of blocking commitment to an ontology containing Pegasus when we say that Pegasus is not.<sup>1</sup> For if a) 'Pegasus' is a name, b) 'Pegasus is not' is meaningful, c) the meaningfulness of 'Pegasus is not' requires the meaningfulness of 'Pegasus', and d) meaning and referent are identified in a name, then saying, meaningfully, that Pegasus is not implies that Pegasus is. But it implies this only if it is wrongly assumed in the first instance that the meaning of a singular term like 'Pegasus' is identified with the entity named by that term.<sup>2</sup> So marking off meaning and reference even in singular terms allows one to say with consistency that Pegasus is not.<sup>3</sup>

Quine's move translates singular terms like Pegasus into predicates. For it allows 'Pegasus is not' to be glossed as, say, 'It is not the case that there is an x such that x is a winged horse that opened the spring of Hippocrene and for

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<sup>1</sup> Quine, W.V. (1961). *From a Logical Point of View*. Cambridge: Harvard, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Quine, W.V. (1961). *From a Logical Point of View*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Meinong's way of avoiding inconsistency in saying "Pegasus is not" is to distinguish existent and subsistent objects. If 'Pegasus' names a subsistent and not an existent object, then one consistently says that Pegasus does not exist. For a defense of this distinction see Meinong, A. (1902). *Ueber Annahmen*. Leipzig: J.A. Barth, p. 74.

all  $y$  if  $y$  is a winged horse that opened the spring of Hippocrene then  $y$  equals  $x$ .<sup>4</sup> But to this Russellian move Quine makes an addition which he illustrates in the case of Pegasus. For just in case Pegasus is so basic as to be unsusceptible of analysis, Quine allows that 'Pegasus is not' be glossed as: 'It is not the case that there is an  $x$  such that  $x$  is-pegasus (or pegasizes), where 'is-pegasus' or 'pegasizes' is a predicate. In any case, since under either Russell's or Quine's assay the alleged name 'Pegasus' is analyzed out without remainder, it is not implied that Pegasus is in saying that Pegasus is not. Thus what Quine calls the problem of Plato's beard is solved.

Yet Quine's nuance is problematic. To be true, 'It is not the case that there is something that pegasizes' must be meaningful. A condition of this is that the predicate 'pegasizes' is meaningful. Since it is like 'is-green' in being irreducible and unanalyzable, the property 'pegasizes' cannot be unpacked by using descriptive phrases. But unlike 'is-green', 'pegasizes' or 'is-pegasus' is not an object of acquaintance. So if it is neither analyzable nor an object of acquaintance how is 'is-pegasus' meaningful?

Besides, if 'Pegasus' is assimilated to a predicate then so too is any other singular term. And then the whole category of subject-predicate statements is swept away. That has the merit of economy. But for this logical elegance a price is paid in ontology. And that is the introduction of individuating properties. The latter go as far back as Scotus' *haecceitas*. But the trouble with them is identifying the thing of which they are the property. Properties, individuating or otherwise, are the properties *of* something. But since all that is unique and individual is absorbed by them, there is nothing left for individuating properties to characterize but a Lockian I-know-not-what, a totally bare particular. So by allowing names to be replaced by individuating predicates, Quine invites something against which he himself recoils, i. e., bare *substrata*. An obvious answer to this is to identify an individual with a complex of properties one of which is individuating. Thus, being-Socrates is analytically predicated of a cluster of properties one of which is the individuating property of being-Socrates. And then bare particulars are avoided.

But this has troubles of its own. For one thing, it breeds circularity in the definition of an individual. For what under this assay is defined as being an individual is a bundle of properties one of which is individuating. For another, it fails to cover the unity of individuals like Socrates. The paradox is that when properties are distinguished from individuals they stand united in

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<sup>4</sup> Quine, W.V. (1961). *From a Logical Point of View*, pp. 7-8.

individuals. For they are brought together by dint of inhering in the same subject. But when that distinction is dropped, so too is the unity. Since there is nothing to unite the properties, an individual like Socrates becomes a pile of predicates. Nor can it be said that the individuating property of being-Socrates unites the properties. As it is one of the properties to be united, it cannot be said to be what unites all the properties. Otherwise something is said to unite itself.

To avoid all this, one might try another tack. Under it, 'Pegasus' is a name just as it appears to be and not a disguised predicate. But what it names is the *idea* Pegasus. Then, one can say that Pegasus is not without assuming that Pegasus is. For since the 'is not' in that statement signifies real being and the referent of 'Pegasus' is mental being, then one consistently says that Pegasus is not.

But Quine himself notes the confusion in this escape.<sup>5</sup> Even granting this mental entity we call the idea of Pegasus, it is not *that* to which we refer when we deny that Pegasus is. So to avoid assuming that Pegasus is in saying that Pegasus is not, it will not do to say that 'Pegasus' in that statement names the idea Pegasus. That just misidentifies what is denied when it is denied that Pegasus is.

So what is the solution to Plato's beard? How do you construe 'Pegasus is not' without either implying that Pegasus is, saying things like there's not something that pegasizes, with all its attendant difficulties, or misidentifying what is denied when it is denied that Pegasus is?

A Strawsonian answer is that, if we only cease identifying meaning and referent in a name, dropping Russell's logically proper names, we can construe 'Pegasus' as a non-naming name. And then, since it is not used to talk about anything, the sentence 'Pegasus does not exist' does not make an assertion in the first place and hence is neither true nor false.<sup>6</sup> But in that case the problem of implying that Pegasus is in saying that Pegasus is not fails to arise. For no assertion is in the first instance made. Thus, the supposed problem of non-being is dissolved.

But unlike either Meinong's, Russell's, or Quine's answer, Strawson's ploy fails to cover the *prima facie* truth of the utterance in question. Typically, when one says that Pegasus does not exist one does not use that sentence to illustrate a point in grammar, to write a line of poetry, to send a secret message or anything like that. To all appearances, one uses it

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<sup>5</sup> Quine, W.V. (1961). *From a Logical Point of View*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Strawson, P. F. (1950). On Referring. *Mind* 59, pp. 320–344.

straightforwardly to make a true assertion. And Strawson himself agrees that sentences that make assertions must be about something and hence be either true or false. So the better course of action is to save the appearance and then try and avoid commitment to Meinong's non-existent Pegasus.

For example, Quine, Russell, and even Meinong would remind Strawson that if someone said that Pegasus does not exist and asked you whether you thought that what he said was true or false, you would answer, "true." You would not answer, "neither." It seems, then, that 'Pegasus does not exist' can count as an assertion. But if so, then the conundrum of non-being is not dissolved after all and the problem of the referent of 'Pegasus' in 'Pegasus is not' remains.

Some might favor another answer, according to Quine.<sup>7</sup> It is to identify the referent of 'Pegasus' not with an idea in the sense of the mental Pegasus-idea which is something actual. For it is evidently not this mental Pegasus-idea that one denies when one denies that Pegasus is. Instead, this subtler answer identifies the referent of 'Pegasus' with an idea in the sense of a group of properties which has possible being only. It is an unactualized possible.

An unactualized possible is in the same sense of 'is' as what is defined is. That is a different sense of 'is' from that which is accorded to an actualized possible. Following tradition, one might say that one signifies essence and the other existence. For that reason it is neither inconsistent nor self-defeating to say that Pegasus is not. In saying this, one says only that the possible being that is named by the subject 'Pegasus' does not have actual being. True, one does assume here that Pegasus is in denying that Pegasus is. But since the 'is' is different each time, the statement is innocuous. It just repeats Aristotle's advice that being is said in many senses. Nor does this answer risk admitting contradictions as unactualized possibles just in case it is said, say, that the round square window is not. Since contradictory subject-terms like 'the round square window' are meaningless and genuine statements require meaningful terms, then the round square window is not assumed to be when it is said that it is not. For no genuine statement has in the first instance been made.

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<sup>7</sup> Quine attributes this answer to a mind more subtle than one that would identify the referent of 'Pegasus' with the mental Pegasus-idea. He names this mind 'Wyman' but does not say either that Wyman represents a real respondent or that Wyman's answer has actually been given. See Quine, W. V. (1961). *From a Logical Point of View*, pp. 2-5.

But despite the *prima facie* appeal of this gambit, Quine, for one, rejects it. To work, it requires the doctrine of the meaninglessness of contradictions. Yet for two reasons Quine balks at that idea.<sup>8</sup> The first is that it threatens proof by *reductio*. In the latter, affirming the premises and denying the conclusion implies a contradiction. So if contradictions are meaningless, so too is *reductio* proof. Either, then, contradictions are not meaningless or proof by *reductio* is compromised. Second, if contradictions are meaningless, then deciding whether or not an expression is meaningful depends on knowing whether or not it is contradictory. But with Church Quine agrees that there is no generally applicable test of whether an expression is contradictory.<sup>9</sup> It follows that the contradictoriness of expressions is ultimately undecipherable. If you have no generally applicable test of contradictoriness and knowing whether or not expressions are meaningful hangs on that test, then you never know whether or not expressions are meaningful. But since that is unacceptable, says Quine, it follows that the assumption in question, i.e. the meaninglessness of contradictions, is false.

But if it is, concludes Quine, then no one can say that 'Pegasus' in 'Pegasus is not' names an unactualized possible. If it cannot be said that the phrase 'round square window' in 'The round square window is not' is meaningless because it is contradictory, then defenders of the solution that 'Pegasus' names an unactualized possible are forced after all to count entities like round square windows as unactualized possibles or as unactualized impossibles when it is said that the round square window is not. And that nullifies their solution to the problem of Plato's beard.

Some might object that neither one of Quine's objections to the doctrine of the meaninglessness of contradictoriness, and hence to saying that 'Pegasus' names an unactualized possible, is conclusive. Taking the objections in reverse order, even if Church is right that there is no generally applicable test of contradictoriness, that does not mean that you cannot tell whether or not expressions are meaningful when contradictions are meaningless. For suppose that a test of contradictoriness is lacking not because none can be found but because none are necessary. Then you can tell whether expressions are contradictory or not without a test. And then the doctrine of the meaninglessness of contradictions fails to imply that we cannot tell whether or not expressions are meaningful. But in that case Quine

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<sup>8</sup> Quine, W.V. (1961). *From a Logical Point of View*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Quine, W.V. (1961). *From a Logical Point of View*, p. 5. See also, Church, A. (1936). A Note on the *Entscheidungsproblem*". *Journal of Symbolic Logic* 1, p. 40f., p. 101f.

cannot use that supposed implication as grounds for denying that Pegasus names an unactualized possible.

But as a matter of fact, a case can be made for saying that contradictoriness *is* the sort of thing for which a generally applicable test is unnecessary. For suppose that contradictoriness is the sort of thing for which a test T is necessary. Then since any expression's being meaningful requires that it pass T, then that very test T, to be meaningful, must either pass itself or some higher-order test of contradictoriness, T1. But the first makes something the test of itself, from which Quine himself recoils on account of the theory of types. And the second invites an infinite regress of higher-order tests of contradictoriness.

Thus, it seems that defenders of the view that 'Pegasus' names an unactualized possible can answer Quine's second objection. The meaninglessness of contradictoriness, on which their view hangs, rules out knowing whether or not a string of symbols is meaningful only if it is conceded that a general test of contradictoriness is in the first instance required. But if only for the reasons just given, no such concession would be made by those who hold that 'Pegasus' in 'Pegasus is not' names an unactualized possible.

However, Quine's first objection to the doctrine of the meaninglessness of contradiction is more convincing. As against it, defenders of the doctrine might counter that his argument is question-begging. Quine rejects the doctrine because it rules out proof by *reductio*. He thus *uses reductio* proof to refute a view because it excludes *reductio* proof. By analogy, suppose I use an argument from analogy to refute some belief of yours because it undermines argument from analogy. You then have a right to demand that I show your belief wrong *independently* of using an argument from analogy. Otherwise you have the right to complain that I beg the question in favor of argument from analogy.

But this objection is captious. For it simply plays on the term '*reductio* proof.' When he rejects the meaninglessness of contradictions because it compromises *reductio* proof, Quine means by the latter the narrowly logical sense of '*reductio* proof'. Under it, you show that the joint assertion of an argument's premises and the denial of its conclusion as an added assumption yields a contradiction. From this you conclude that the conclusion of the argument must be true. But his own argument against the meaninglessness of contradictions is a *reductio* proof in the broader sense of the term. This consists in showing that P is false because it implies what is unacceptable, in

this case, the elimination of *reductio* proof in the narrow sense. It follows that there is no circle and that the objection is answered.

Even so, defenders of the meaninglessness of contradictions might counter that Quine's first objection fails to recognize important meaninglessness. Wittgenstein, for example, recognized the importance of the mystical even though putting the mystical into words was nonsensical.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, some nonsense might be conducive to its own disclosure and hence be useful and to that extent important nonsense. Such is the case in *reductio* proof. The combination of the premises and the negation of the conclusion is useful nonsense because, in the context of the proof in which it figures, it is a necessary step in its own disclosure. For as the proof proceeds, the contradiction that was implicit in the foregoing combination is explicitly generated in the penultimate step of the proof. And then the validity of the argument in question is shown. Thus, practicing his own pragmatism might have restrained Quine from concluding that the meaninglessness of contradictoriness ruins *reductio* proof.

But to all of this Quine has a good answer. Even if with Wittgenstein we recognize important nonsense and even supposing that some of this is useful nonsense, it seems that Quine is right that nonsense of any sort has no place in logical proofs.

Let us take stock. Suppose that Quine is right that claiming that 'Pegasus' names an unactualized possible threatens *reductio* proof. Suppose too that as was suggested at the outset, his own solution *via* individuating properties either invites bare particulars or else both implies circularity in the definition of individuals and excludes the unity of individuals. Then what can be done? What is the solution to the problem of Plato's beard?

To close, it seems that the best answer is the one that is behind Quine's. By many it is regarded as one of the major achievements in philosophy in the Twentieth Century. Remarkably, it clings even closer to Ockam's Razor than does Quine. Moreover, it differs from Quine's only in avoiding individuating properties like "pegasizes." That is its merit. For then it entirely bypasses saying things like "There is not something that pegasizes". Not just that but it also sidesteps the dilemma that follows on the heels of those properties. I refer to Russell's answer.<sup>11</sup> Shunning individuating properties like "pegasizes", Russell is not then caught between admitting bare particulars

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<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein, L. (1961). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translation by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 6.52–6.522, pp. 149–151.

<sup>11</sup> Russell, B. (1905). On Denoting. *Mind* 14, pp. 479–493.

and both causing circularity in the definition of individuals and excluding the unity of individuals. In ‘Pegasus is not’ ‘Pegasus’ is just translated as a definite description such as the winged horse that opened the spring of Hippocrene. And the resulting negative existential statement that preserves the truth of the statement is that it is not the case that there is an  $x$  such that  $x$  is a winged horse that opened the spring of Hippocrene, and for all  $y$ , if  $y$  is a winged horse that opened the spring of Hippocrene then  $y$  equals  $x$ . Unlike Strawson’s move, this allows the common sense statement, “‘Pegasus does not exist’ is true”. Unlike Quine’s, it does this without the onus of properties like pegasizes. And unlike Meinong’s, it covers that same truth without the extravagance of non-existent particulars. And so it is that Russell kills three birds with one philosophical stone.

### References

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