

Getting a grip: ontological commitment, truthmaking and aboutness

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Two strands of thought in Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment

Two connections between formalisation and commitment:

- (i) Formalisation uncovers ontological commitment: the commitment of a sentence is determined by its logical form.
- (ii) Formalisation is constrained by ontological commitment: sentences have an ‘ontological form’ that a correct formalisation has to approximate.

(i)
$$\frac{\text{Sam is slowly buttering his toast.}}{\text{Sam is buttering his toast.}}$$

(2)
$$\frac{\begin{array}{l} \text{Spaghetti can be cooked à la Bolognese.} \\ \text{Spaghetti can be cooked à la Carbonara.} \\ \text{Spaghetti can be cooked à la Cinque P.} \end{array}}{\exists x, y, z (x, y \text{ and } z \text{ are ways of cooking spaghetti and } x \neq y \wedge x \neq z \wedge y \neq z)}$$

(id_a)
$$\frac{\begin{array}{l} Fa \\ Ga \end{array}}{(F \wedge G) a}$$

(id_{x,y})
$$\frac{\begin{array}{l} x \text{ is red.} \\ y \text{ is round.} \\ x = y \end{array}}{x \text{ is round and green.}}$$

Three reasons for preferring coordination and not quantification as guide to a person’s ontology:

1. Ontological Reinterpretation
2. Trade-off between Ontology and Ideology
3. Proxy-Functions

Morals:

1. no modal criterion for commitment: we are committed to what is *in fact* required to make our sentences true;
2. reference, aboutness and commitment are relations between items in the world:

“Constraint *C* is to be imposed by accepting *C*-theory, according to Putnam. But *C*-theory is just more theory, more grist for the mill; and more theory will go the way of all theory. To which I reply: *C* is *not* to be imposed just by accepting *C*-theory. That is a misunderstanding of what *C* is. The constraint is *not* that an intended interpretation must somehow make our account of *C* come out true. The constraint is that an intended interpretation must conform to *C* itself.” (Lewis 1984: 62)

Aboutness and topic-neutrality

“...the basis of the principle of substitutivity appears quite solid; whatever can be said about the person Cicero [...] should be equally true when said about the person Tully [...] this being the same person.” (Quine 1953: 17)

“That M is a *thing* can't be *said*; it is nonsense: but *something* is *shown* by the symbol “ M ”. In [the] same way, that a *proposition* is a subject-predicate proposition can't be said: but it is *shown* by the symbol.” (Wittgenstein (1979: 109), cf. also 1921: § 4.126)

“Even if there *were* propositions of [the] form “ M is a thing” they would be superfluous (tautologous) because what this tries to say is something which is already *seen* when you see “ M ”.” (Wittgenstein 1979: 114)

“Call A *peculiarly about* x in D [...] exactly if there is some world w and a permutation g which permutes x with $y \neq x$ [...] such that A is true in w but not in $g(w)$ – while no permutation has that effect if it leaves x [...] fixed.” (van Fraassen 1991: 469)

Truthmaking and foundation

The truthmaker intuition consists in roughly the following two tenets:

1. Truth is relational: being true is being made true by something. It is then a further question whether the things in virtue of which truthbearers are true are states of affairs, some objects or ways they are.
2. Truth is grounded: true truthbearers are true because the world is how it is; truth is not brute. It is a further question whether some truthbearers may ground themselves and what the grounding in question comes to.

What makes it true that p has to be *de facto* sufficient for the truth of “ p ” – it has to found this truth and we have to choose it inclusive enough to do this: there is a strong pull to *truthmaker internalism*. But we should avoid the step to *truthmaker necessitarianism* – we should not spell out the sufficiency of the truthmaker in modal terms.

Bringing them together in a theory of making?

1. What makes it the case that “Sam is a dog” is about Sam? Something about Sam and our words about him.
2. What makes it the case that Sam makes it true that Sam is a dog? Something about Sam. If Sam is essentially a dog, perhaps he himself suffices for this truth. But for “Sam is black”, Armstrong argues, something more is required: his blackness has to come into play.

Importantly, however, both our answers are not to questions of logical form: no suggestions is being made that “Sam is black” ‘really’ is short for “ $\exists \phi \exists x (x = \text{Sam} \wedge \phi = \text{blackness} \wedge Ex(x, \phi))$ ”. Ontological form and logical form may well come apart.

References

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