Plato's Quinean Beard: Did Plato ever grow it?

MICHAEL DURRANT

Quine may be taken to use the phrase 'Plato's Beard' to denote a solution to the following problem: How is it possible to speak of that which does not exist, of non-being or as Read[1] has it, to denote a solution to the problem: 'How can a sentence with empty names have meaning?'.

Quine writes:

> Nonbeing must in some sense be, otherwise what is that there is not? This tangled doctrine might be nicknamed *Plato's beard*; historically it has proved tough, frequently dulling the edge of Occam's razor.[2]

To expand. If nonbeing in *no* sense is, then we cannot ever assert that it is *not*; yet if it in *some* sense *is*, then how can it *remain* non-being? Let us fill out with an example (coined from Quine). If Pegasus in *no* sense exists, then how can we ever assert that Pegasus does not exist?—yet we may clearly want to assert that Pegasus does not exist and affirm the proposition that it is false that Pegasus exists. If, on the other hand, Pegasus in *some* sense exists, how may we affirm that he does not? We shall be contradicting ourselves or be guilty of equivocation.

In offering '*Plato's beard*' as what Read calls a *solution*[3] to the problem: 'How can a sentence with empty names have meaning?', Read claims that Quine holds that Plato is propounding the following. In the case of a sentence containing an empty name like 'Pegasus', Pegasus must, in some sense, *have* existence, must have existence attributed to him; there exists something that Pegasus *is*. Pegasus is thus given the status of a peculiar existing entity. Such an account seems warranted by Quine's writing[4] in which Plato is implied as being akin to his imaginary philosophy. McX, who:

[1] Stephen Read, *Thinking about Logic* (Oxford University Press, 1994) Ch. 5, p. 123.

[2] W. V. O. Quine, 'On What there is', in *From a Logical Point of View* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 1–2.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Op. cit., pp. 2–3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181919700003X Published online by Cambridge University Press

> would sooner be deceived by the crudest and most flagrant counterfeit than grant the nonbeing of Pegasus

and later[5] to his imaginary philosopher Wyman, who insists that Pegasus *is* in the sense of *subsists*, even though he may allow the nonexistence of Pegasus by distinguishing between existence and subsistence. Plato then, by implication, is to solve the problem of nonbeing by allowing into his ontology subsistent entities, parallel, we may surmise, to Meinong[6]. Pegasus (and other entities) putatively named by empty names have subsistent existence. Sentences containing empty names as their putative subjects have meaning in that such empty names really do denote after all; they denote subsistent entities. Pegasus and the rest really do exist in some sense—they *subsist* and Plato posits a world of subsistent entities as a solution to the problem of nonbeing. '*Plato's beard*' is a growth of subsistent entities.

Read[7] does not treat '*Plato's beard*' as a *solution* to the problem of nonbeing, rather he treats it as denoting the *puzzle*:[8] 'How can sentences with empty names have a meaning?' He urges that for Quine it denotes a *response* to the puzzle in the form: empty names, whilst they denote nothing existent, nevertheless must denote *something*—everything has being, though only some beings actually exist[9]; which is in line with what I have pressed above by detailed reference to Quine's text. Plato is thus committed to a realm of a special sort of existence viz., subsistence, subsistent entities—as was Russell in 1903: 'Being is that which belongs to every possible object of thought'[10], even though he later came to reject this in his 'Theory of Descriptions'.

Although Read uses the phrase '*Plato's beard*' to denote the *puzzle*: 'How can sentences with empty names have meaning?' he *also* gives Plato a beard in the form of a growth of subsistent entities. It is clear from his writing[11] that in his view Plato would treat King Lear as having some kind of subsistent existence, as would the father of Goneril and Regan and, further, a golden mountain. He writes, in the context of explaining the force of Russell's theory of descriptions;

> For example, take the second description, in a proposition such as 'A mountain of solid gold does not exist'. Rather than concede, as

[5] p. 3.
[6] parallel to Meinong: Read makes such a connection.
[7] Op. cit.
[8] Op. cit., p. 131.
[9] Ibid.
[10] as cited by Read (ibid.)
[11] Op. cit., pp. 124–5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181919700003X Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Plato does, that there is in some sense a mountain of solid gold whose existence we then deny, Russell claims that the logical analysis of the proposition does not give it the obvious subject-predicate form. Logically, what it says is that there is nothing which is a mountain of solid gold, and what this means is, the property of of being a mountain of solid gold is not instantiated.'

Plato is thus accused of confusing grammatical and logical form and of holding that there *is*, in some sense—a subsistent sense—a mountain of solid gold whose existence we then deny:

From *where* in Plato's writings do these authors establish the thesis that Plato solved the problem of nonbeing by reference to the positing of subsistent entities which had no actual existence? I can trace no reference to any Platonic text in Quine's allusion to Plato in the paper cited. Read writes:[12]

> In the 'Way of Truth' in his poem *On Nature*, Parmenides had written, 'It cannot be said or thought that "it is not"'. What is, is, and what is not, is not, and cannot even be thought not to be. Plato's reaction is found in several places in his writings, but most notably in his dialogue the *Parmenides*. What is not in some sense must be, for we are ascribing some character to it…

Read however does not give us a detailed reference or references. Indeed we may well note that at *Sophist* 237B 7–C8, the Eleatic Stranger, having established from Theaetetus that the phrase 'τὸ μηδαμῶς ὂν' ('that which is absolutely not', 'absolute not-being') has a use, goes on to say that 'not-being' ('τὸ μὴ ὂν') cannot apply to any being and the following argument [237C 9ff.] makes it clear that it cannot be applied to any subsistent entity either since even a subsistent entity must *be something*, more particularly some *one* thing [237D 8–10]. Further, at 237E 1–2 the Stranger goes so far as to say that he who says not-something, must, it seems, quite necessarily say absolutely nothing. In other words Plato seems to be holding that the problem of nonbeing is 'solved' in that sentences containing empty names *say* nothing; 'not-being' reduces to 'nothing' which amounts to saying that no account can be offered of such 'sayings' as 'Pegasus does not exist'[13].

What I shall attempt to argue in this paper is that Plato had no such beard as Quine and Read attribute to him. He was not, in his discussions of nonbeing, committed to the existence of a realm of subsistently existing entities which were the referents of empty names.

[12] p. 123.
[13] see below.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181919700003X Published online by Cambridge University Press

The crucial move in Quine's, and especially Read's account, is to attribute to Plato the thesis that 'What is not must in some sense be, *for we are ascribing some character to it*' i.e, in saying something is *not*, we are ascribing some character to something which, in some sense, *is* viz., which *subsists*. To take Plato to be committed to such a thesis at least supposes that Plato's central concern in his later writings was with what Owen[14] picks out as the *complete* or *substantive* use of 'to be' in which it determines a one-place predicate ('X is', 'X is not'). In this use of 'is' to say 'X is' would be to ascribe the character of being to X; to say 'X is not' would be to ascribe the character of not-being to X. Focusing attention on *this* use of 'is' leads to what we might describe (following Owen) as 'the common place view' and *this* view, in turn, leads *not* to saying that negative existentials commit Plato to posit a realm of subsistent entities, but rather to accuse him of not being able to offer *any* account of such negative existentials as 'Pegasus does not exist'.[15] It assents to the position that:

> Plato in the *Sophist* had isolated a complete use of the verb 'to be', that in which it determines a one-place predicate and signifies 'to exist', and within this use he rejects negative constructions with the verb as breeding intolerable paradox.[16]

Owen claims that the 'common-place view' and this familiar reading of the *Sophist* runs into trouble that no amount of ingenious patching up will save it. Rather he advances the claim that the one-place use of 'is' ('X is'; 'X is not') is not discerned by Plato. That it is not so discerned by Plato is indicated by the work of e.g., Kahn, Runciman, Vlastos and Frede, amongst others.[17] Owen strengthens these indications by attacking the bases on which the 'common place view' depends (especially in the sections of his paper on *The Argument from Nothing* and *The Prospect of Joint Illumination*[18]) and more positively by arguing in depth and with considerable force that the *Sophist* will turn out to be primarily an essay in problems of ref-

[14] G. E. L. Owen, 'Plato on Not-Being' in Gregory Vlastos (ed.) *Plato I: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1971), p. 223.

[15] *see Sophist* 237E 1–2, cited above.

[16] Owen, op. cit., p. 229.

[17] C. Kahn, 'The Greek Verb "to Be" and the Concept of Being', *Foundations of Language* ii (1966); W. G. Runciman, *Plato's Later Epistemology* (Cambridge University Press, 1962); G. Vlastos, 'Degrees of Reality in Plato' in Renford Bambrough (ed.), *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965; M. Frede, 'Pradikation und Existenzaussage', *Hypomnematia*, xviii, 1967, pp. 1–99.

[18] see pp. 225–231.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181919700003X Published online by Cambridge University Press

erence and predication and in the *incomplete uses* of the verb 'to be' associated with these.[19] The *incomplete use* is that use of 'is'/'is not' which determines a *two place* predicate ('X is Y', 'X is not Y').[20] For Owen the argument in the *Sophist* 'neither contains nor compels any isolation of an existential verb'[21] The intolerable paradoxes [*Sophist* 237B 8–239B 7] result *not* from Plato focusing attention on the one-place use of 'is', but by confusing not-being and nothing—as Parmenides did.[22] Indeed to support his case Owen points out that Plato does not say that his problems about not-being come from understanding 'being' in a certain way, but from understanding 'not' in a certain ways. They are solved by giving up a confusion about *negation* [*see Sophist* 240B 5, 240D 6–8]. If Owen is right, then we are not faced with having to say that Plato could offer us no account of negative existentials; by implication he *can*, by giving up a confusion about negation and in all this there is no reference to a 'solution' to the problem of nonbeing by the positing of subsistent entities.

Whilst we might be tempted to press that there is some reason for thinking that Owen's claim that Plato did not isolate or even in some way recognize the one-place use of 'is', which forms the basis of the claims of Quine and Read, is rather too extravagant, I think we may justifiably resist the temptation. The reason we might be tempted to produce is Plato's use of the phrase 'τὸ μηδαμῶς ὂν' at *Sophist* 237B 8 at the start of the paradoxes and his subsequent use of the phrase 'τὸ μὴ ὂν αὐτο καθ' αὑτο' in the passage 238C7–10. However Plato's use of these phrases is not sufficient for claiming that he *does* mark off by these means the one-place use of 'is' (and hence rebut the claim that he simply confused 'not being' and 'nothing'), on the grounds that at *Republic* 478D 7 and 477A 3–4 Plato uses the very same phrases and holds that 'properly speaking that which is not must not be called one thing, but nothing' [478B 12–C1]. I am thus led to the conclusion that the 'one-place' use of 'is' implicit in the writings of Quine and Read is, as Owen claims, not even clearly discerned by Plato.

What Plato *does* clearly discern and focus attention on in the *Sophist* is the *two-place* incomplete use of the verb 'to be'. The isolation and recognition of this *two-place incomplete* use enables one to debunk the claims:

(i) that Plato was unable to recognize negative existentials;

[19] Op. cit., p. 225.
[20] Owen sets out these on p. 223.
[21] p. 225.
[22] p. 221 and *Sophist* 237E 1–2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181919700003X Published online by Cambridge University Press

(ii) that he was committed to the existence of subsistent entities such as Pegasus or a golden mountain.

How then does Plato solve the problem of singular negative existentials, such as 'A does not exist' where 'A' is an empty proper name or again negative existentials such as 'Z does not exist', where 'Z' is a Russellian indefinite description? Armed with Plato's concentration on the *two-place*, i*ncomplete* use of 'is' we may reasonably advance the following:

(1) 'A does not exist' = 'A is not an F' (or 'A is not F'); 'Pegasus does not exist' = 'Pegasus is not a horse'. Both the original and its expansion in the form of the two-place incomplete use are true.

(2) 'Z does not exist' = 'Z is not an F' (or 'Z is not F'); 'A golden mountain does not exist' = 'A golden mountain is not a mountain'; 'is no real mountain'. Again, both the original and the expansion are true.

In offering such an account as in (1) above, Plato is not attributing nonexistence (i.e. non-actuality) to that which exists (subsists): he is in effect saying that there is *no such entity* as Pegasus; there is no such thing as a winged horse; a winged horse is *no* horse. Equally, in regard to (2) above. he is not attributing non-existence (i.e. non-actuality) to a golden mountain which s*ubsists*. He is in effect saying that there is no such entity as a golden mountain: a golden mountain is *no* mountain. Such negative existentials are possible because they are writeable in the form of the *two-place* use of 'is'/'is not'. The problem of 'nonbeing' (to use Quine's expression) is solved by the introduction of this two-place, incomplete use. For good measure, we may surmise that Plato would treat a negative existential containing a vacuous definite description in a parallel fashion:

(3) 'The present King of France does not exist'='The present King of France is no king'; 'is no monarch', which is in effect to say that there is no such thing (no such monarch) as the present King of France.

The above then offers us an account of how Plato *can* allow for singular negative existentials which have as their putative subjects: (i) empty proper names; (ii) Russellian indefinite descriptions; (iii) Russellian definite descriptions, *without* at all having to posit subsistent entities.

Having offered an account of how Plato can answer the question: 'How is it possible for propositions of a singular existential kind containing empty names etc., to have meaning?', let us now pursue the puzzle: 'How can sentences of a non-existential kind which contain empty proper names have a meaning?' further. Here we must face Plato's claim at *Sophist* 262E 4–5 that a λὸγος, if it is to be a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181919700003X Published online by Cambridge University Press

genuine λὸγος, must have a *subject*, without a subject it is impossible—a claim reiterated at 263A10. Is this to claim that sentences containing empty names are impossible i.e. meaningless and hence that Plato, after all, far from positing subsistent entities to solve this problem can offer no solution at all? This would only be the case if we were to translate the ubiquitous 'λὸγος' here as 'sentence', but there are good grounds for holding that it is best translated as 'proposition'. I shall now enlist these:

(i) the discussion at *Sophist* 261C 6 is concerned with how *discourse* is possible. 'λὸγον' is put on the same logical level (yet contrasted with) opinion (δὸξαν), and granted this it is better rendered as 'true *speech*', rather than 'true sentence'

(ii) at 261C 8–9 the question is raised whether both 'λὸγον' and 'δὸξαν' are both always true and neither is ever false and it is plausible, in this context to hold that truth and falsity are properties of *propositions*, items of speech as opposed to items of language (sentences).

(iii) at 261D ff. Plato (famously) goes on to investigate names, nouns (ὀνοματα) and later verbs (ρἠματα) and claims that in these we have two kinds of *vocal* indications of being viz., it is our *use* of these in speech, in our propounding of propositions which are his concern not the uttering of them in sentences.

(iv) At 262 A7-10, Plato again talks of our *saying, speaking* (λεγὸμενων) and makes the point that 'λὸγος', speech, discourse—more particularly a proposition—is never composed of names (nouns) alone spoken in succession nor of verbs spoken without nouns, and he goes on to expand on this. Verbs and nouns do not make a 'λὸγος' if spoken (λεγὸμενα) merely successively. Since Plato here is once again using the language of *speech*, and not the language of 'language' his point is best made by saying that a string of nouns or a string of verbs spoken in succession do not make a *proposition*: neither do a string of nouns and verbs spoken in succession so make. A proposition is not merely a string of nouns and verbs (or both) spoken in succession. The point is then worked out in detail at 262B 5–C1.

(v) At 262C 5–7 we get the famous point that it is only when verbs are mingled (ϐνμπλοκἠ) with nouns and such mingling yields a 'fit' that we get a 'λὸγος' and a 'λὸγος' indicates action or inaction or the existence of anything that exists or does not exist (*see* 262C 2–5). That is, we only have a proposition, a sentence which *says* something, when we combine a name/noun in a certain way with a verb. To put the matter starkly, what Plato is concerned with here is how simple propositions (*see* 262C 9–10) of a subject-predicate type are possible and how they are formed. This account is fairly common

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181919700003X Published online by Cambridge University Press

place. Indeed Geach[23] has suggested that the Plato recognized the name/predicable distinction in his distinction between 'ὀνομα' and 'ῥῆμα'. On this view a single subject-predicate proposition is formed by the insertion of a name into the argument place of a function and this yields what Geach calls a *predication* and a predication is a proposition.[24]

(vi) At 262D 5 it is *speaking* (λέγειν) which occurs when names (nouns) and verbs are combined and this involves more than merely giving names (262D 6).

Having produced grounds for holding that 'λὸγος' in the context of the discussion at *Sophist* 261C6 ff. is best translated as 'proposition', as opposed to 'sentence' (and note also 263A 4 where the Stranger(Plato) says that it is for Theaetetus to say what the predication is about and what the subject of the predication is), we are now able to explicate Plato's claim that a 'λὸγος', if it is to be a genuine 'λὸγος', must have a subject. A 'λὸγος', a genuine subject-predicate proposition must have a subject; the sentence expressing it must have in its subject place a *genuine* name i.e. a non-empty name. A putative subject-predicate proposition which invokes an empty name as its putative subject is *no genuine subject-predicate proposition,* for there is nothing for it to be a predication *about*. It is alleged subject-predicate *propositions* invoking empty names which Plato regards as impossible. On this account he is not saying that the *sentence* e.g. 'Pegasus moved very swiftly' is impossible, is meaningless. How could he? Such sentences (or rather their Greek equivalent) occur in Greek literature and are understood. Sentences containing empty names are possible, meaningful in that they break no syntactical rules and employ a recognized vocabulary, but they are *not* 'λὸγοι', *not* propositions. In crude, they cannot *say* anything about something, propound anything about something, for there is nothing for them to say or propound *about*; an empty name must fail of reference. Note that Plato later writes at 262E 6:

> 'And it (the 'λὸγος') must also be of some quality (ποιὸν) must it not? and the quality a 'λὸγος' must have (be) is that of having truth or falsity attributed to it, being true or false.' [*see* 263A10–263B 3]

In other words every proposition is either true or false. Sentences containing empty names in grammatical subject places cannot, as we have seen, express propositions and hence be allocated a truth value.[25]

[23] In 'History of the Corruptions of Logic', reprinted in *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), p. 45.

[24] See P. T. Geach, *Reference and Generality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), Ch. 2.

[25] This position is parallel to Frege's position.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181919700003X Published online by Cambridge University Press

We may now speculate on how we may relate what was said earlier *vis-à-vis* Plato's admitting the possibility of singular negative existentials containing empty names and the above considerations. My speculation would be as follows: in order for a sentence of a simple subject-predicate kind to express a *proposition* of a simple subject-predicate kind, it is *presupposed* that there is a *true* existential proposition to the effect that the subject exists e.g. that in order for the sentence 'Margaret Thatcher worked hard' to express a proposition, it is *presupposed* that there was such a person as Margaret Thatcher; that 'Margaret Thatcher' is *not* an empty name. As we have seen, at least by implication, for Plato the sentence 'Pegasus exists' expresses a possible proposition; it expresses a *false* proposition being rendered as 'Pegasus is a horse', which is false. Since 'Pegasus moved swiftly' does not meet the requirement of *presupposition* it is a meaningful sentence but can express no proposition: it is truth valueless.[26]

Now it may be held to be unsatisfactory to offer an account of how sentences containing empty names have meaning in the terms offered earlier viz., in terms of breaking no rules of syntax and employing a recognized vocabulary, on the grounds that sentences containing some empty names may reasonably be held to express *propositions* and can be allocated a truth value in e.g. fiction, myth or legend. It will be said that we may allocate the truth value 'T' to e.g. 'Pegasus was a winged horse' 'Pegasus moved swiftly'; 'King Lear went mad': 'Macbeth murdered Banquo' and likewise the truth value 'F' to (e.g.) 'Lady Macbeth murdered Macbeth'; 'King Lear was the father of Hamlet' such that to give a satisfactory account of how *propositions* containing empty names may have a sense we need to produce a theory which will cater for such cases and indeed for *all* sentences which contain 'referring expressions' which fail to refer and yet which may be held to propound and may be allocated a truth value (see Read's invocation of 'Free Logic' to produce such a theory[27]).

Even so, however unsatisfactory Plato's account may be held to be, it does not commit him to any facial growth in the form of subsistent entities: indeed it leaves him completely clean shaven.

University of Wales, Cardiff.

[26] This position is parallel to that famously advocated by Strawson; that we have some basis for this surmise *see Theaetetus* 186C 6–7.

[27] Op. cit., p. 131ff.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181919700003X Published online by Cambridge University Press