2 Ontology, Language and Existence

In the title page of *Word and Object* Quine quotes an epigram from James Grier Miller: ‘Ontology recapitulates philology’, obviously fashioned after the well-known epigram, ‘Ontology recapitulates philogeny’, meaning that the development of the individual reduplicates the development of the species. Likewise, Quine believes, our views regarding what exists in nature, or ‘the ultimate furniture of the world’ as Russell once put it, evolve with the language that we speak. It is Quine’s view that this evolution of which ‘ontology’ and ‘philology’ are the two aspects, like the two sides of a coin, is subject to investigation and, therefore, responsive to reason. He holds, as we have seen, that since our ontology is internal to the language we speak and since we cannot step outside language altogether, we can only appraise our ontology in a piece-meal way, as Neurath’s captain renewed his ship plank by plank without putting ashore.

Accordingly, in the last chapter of *Word and Object*, Quine undertakes this piece-meal task. He discusses the questions: Are there physical objects, sense-data, propositions, classes, attributes, measures (e.g. miles, degrees Fahrenheit), possible objects, facts, infinitesimals (e.g. instantaneous velocities), ideal objects (e.g. mass points, frictionless surfaces), geometrical objects, ordered pairs, numbers, minds? The list is indeed peculiar to ‘ontology’. But what does someone who asks whether any of these things exist wish to know?

Take two of the extreme items in Quine’s list which he only mentions in passing: ‘sakes’ and ‘behalves’. Nobody, not even a philosopher, asks seriously whether there are ‘sakes’ and ‘behalves’, or whether the word ‘sake’ in the sentence ‘Please, do it for my sake’ names or stands for an entity. This, however, is not true of ‘and’ and ‘not’. Thus Russell at one time thought that
such logical connectives are objects. We know how Wittgenstein
dealt with this claim in the *Tractatus* and what alternative account
he put in its place. But are we to say that Wittgenstein was
reducing the ontology he had inherited from Russell? If he
thought that Russell was wrong, as he did, how did he think
Russell was wrong? What sort of misapprehension was he under?
Is it really like the misapprehension of the child who, steeped in
mythology, believes that there are fire-breathing dragons?

Quine’s answer is a considered, deliberate Yes. His view, if I
understand it rightly, is this: To claim that there are dragons is to
claim something false or untrue in the sense that we cannot keep
this statement without making many adjustments to what else we
wish to say on a thousand different occasions. To keep it is not
worth the inconvenience of these adjustments. This is what is
meant by claiming it to be false. It is because the child obviously
goes along with the rest of us in his linguistic responses
everywhere else that he is wrong when he believes that there are
fire-breathing dragons. It is the same, Quine tells us, with his
fictitious philosopher Wyman who believes in the existence of the
possible fat man standing at the door. When he is shown what it
would cost him to keep this statement and others like it, he will
have the choice of paying the price or retracting what he now
claims. Quine thinks that unless he is utterly perverse, those
considerations of convenience, economy, etc., that weigh with us
will equally weigh with him and persuade him to retract his claim
and thus reduce his ontology.

While I think that it is indeed the case that when we assert a
statement, consider or affirm its truth, we take for granted, and
are ready to go along with, much else that belongs to speaking the
language in which the statement is made, I do not think that
Quine’s account does justice to either the example of the child or
that of the philosopher. Nor, therefore, does it succeed in
papering over the differences between them. The child has simply
come to believe what he was told or what he read because he
mistook the way it was intended. He could have come to the same
belief by believing a lie. The philosopher Wyman, on the other
hand, is in the grip of a puzzle or paradox and he suggests a way
of resolving it. This involves regarding what does not exist,
Pegasus, as something that exists in the realm of possibility. But
what does regarding it as such come to or involve? Is this a belief?
Is it like believing that there is a distant land where are to be