

DISCUSSION II

QUINE ON ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

Prof. Gopal Krishna Sinha's article, entitled, "Quine on Ontological Commitment" has appeared in *"Indian Philosophical Quarterly"*, Vol. XXVII, No.4 (October 2000). The article is stimulating, though at the same time it is puzzling. It contains much food for philosophical reflection, though at the same time it leaves much to be desired. Any curious and critical student of Philosophy who turns to this same article of Sinha, with a view to grasp noteworthy insights of W. V. Quine might not get the expected satisfaction on reading that article. He might be left wondering whether the article has helped him to acquaint himself adequately with the Ontological standpoint of Quine. On the contrary, he would most probably meet with disconcerting puzzlement, and would get the feeling that the article fails to indicate precisely the ontological views of Quine, regarding "what there is." Though the article deals with a very important and challenging topic in the field of contemporary Western Philosophy, it does not seem to succeed in shedding adequate enlightening light on the topic.

To begin with a critical evaluation of the said article of Sinha, we have to state that Sinha has not pin-pointed the exact orientation of his exposition of this subject, viz, "Ontological commitment". As soon as we confront this abstruse subject, a question inevitably surfaces before us, viz., Ontological commitment on whose part ? Is it ontological commitment on the part of the thinker who makes any philosophical statement itself ? The distinction between "a statement" and "the maker of a statement" may at first appear to be trivial, subtle and insignificant. But, on a closer reflection, it would be seen to be very much useful in order to gain a clearer perception into the significance of the topic under discussion. If we go to the original writings of Quine, we find that the reference of the phrase "Ontological Commitment" is primarily directed to the "statement" rather than to the "thinker"

making the statement. Obviously, a very significant statement may imply some specific ontological commitment, although the thinker making that statement may not fully align himself with the implications of the statement. The thinker might be inclined either to qualify the said statement, or even to reject it outright. Therefore, it is quite pertinent to be clear as to the reference of ontological commitment - whether it is to be associated with a certain statement or with the maker of that statement. Unfortunately, Sinha has not made this point clear in his article.

Sinha writes : "What he (i.e. Quine) wants to say is that physical objects are nothing but "postulated entities." Here a question arises, if physical objects are treated as merely "postulated entities", how can it be decided that something is a postulated entity ? Under what criterion we still refuse to say that physical objects exist ? Quine himself does not have any solution to this problem." [*IPQ* XXVII : 4, page 450] This Quotation from Sinha's article under discussion is a veritable nest of ill-digested information and confused thoughts. It does not indicate a proper acquaintance with relevant historical antecedents. Nor does it display a proper grasp of Quine's philosophical position.

In order to dispel the confusion which envelops the above given quotation from Sinha's article, we have set forth a) the historical antecedents, to which Quine's exposition harks back, b) Quine's own words, which present his standpoint; and c) certain "considerations" which are relevant to the main topic of his speculation.

a) Historical Antecedents : Students who are fairly well-acquainted with the History of Modern Western Philosophy know what Locke and B. Russell have to say about external physical objects. Locke maintains that, while he can confidently talk about the qualities of physical objects (primary qualities and secondary qualities), perceived by us in sensory experience, he can in no way talk about the "substance" in which these qualities inhere. Locke's famous words in this connection are - "substance" is something "I know not what." Bertrand Russell, in like manner, dwells on the "sense-data", which come to us from external physical object, but the "source" from, which these sense-data arise and come to us is never given to us and hence, that source has to be characterized as "Logical Constructions." Even Kant makes a distinction between the sensory "phenomena"

and the unknown "noumena" or "things-in-themselves. Kant goes at great length to demonstrate how Pure Reason imposes its own forms of categories upon the ever-flowing stream of sensible experience.... Against this historical background, it should not be difficult for us to understand Quine's words, when he says that physical objects are "postulated entities." Evidently, Quine's "postulated entities" are parallels of Locke's "substance", Russell's "Logical constructions", and Kant's "Thing-in-Itselfes."

b) Quine's standpoint : Quine's own statement taken from his "Notes on Existence and Necessity", is quite illuminating :- "My purpose is to set forth certain considerations, which while not answering these questions [viz, 1. "What is there?" and 2. "Are modalities admissible in statement?"] must condition any tenable answers." This quotation makes it clear that Quine himself is aware of the fact that his exposition does not solve the problem, concerning the existence of physical object. Such being the case, why accusingly remark, as Sinha does, that Quine does not have any solution of this problem ? A closer study of Quine's writings clearly shows that Quine is primarily concerned, not with the existence of physical objects, but with the being of abstract entities (like universals, numbers, classes, attributes). In this connection, knowledgable readers will readily recall now some thinkers like Meinong persistently argue that abstract entities, like Pegasus, must have being, in some sense or other. If such abstract entities had no being at all, then we would not be able to talk about them at all. This is the age old question of the being of abstract entities. It is inseparably connected with the Platonic riddle on non-being. [this riddle is nick named as Plato's Beard.] It is expressed by the statement "non-being must be, in some sense or other." i.e. Abstract entities must have being, in some sense or other. If we keep this riddle as the back-drop of Quine's discussion about entities, we can instantly perceive the irrelevance of Sinha's statement, quoted above. He (Prof. Sinha) has missed the main thrust of Quine's enquiry.

c) Certain Important "Considerations" : In the quotation given above in (b), Quine speaks of certain "Considerations", which must condition any tenable answer to the question, concerning the existence of abstract entities. What are these important considerations ? We can gather them from Quine's essay, "Notes

on Existence and Necessity" as follows: i) Mathematics depends on the recognition of abstract objects. ii) No intentional mode of statement composition is needed in Mathematics. iii) The question of ontological presuppositions reduces completely to the question of the domain of objects, covered by the quantifier. iv) The extensional modes of statement composition are the only useful modes, susceptible to quantification..... In the light of these considerations, so explicitly stated, we can realize how and why modern Mathematical Logic, which deals with Quantifiers and variables, still remains formal and extensional. It can help us to explore the world of possibilities, without helping us to know definitely which of the possibilities has translated itself into actuality. Sensible Experience alone is our guide to the world of actuality.

The most objectionable statement in Sinha's article appears on page 449 of *IPQ XXVII*: 4 [October 2000], viz. "Thus Quine, like Ayer, Plato, Aristotle... believes in the reality of particulars." This statement is faulty, because i) It credits Plato with the belief in the reality of particulars ii) It puts Plato on the same platform along with Aristotle, iii) It puts Plato on the same plane as A.J. Ayer. This triple error can be explicated as follows :-

i) It is wrong to maintain that Plato was a believer in the reality of Particulars. Down the centuries, the Western World of Philosophy has been fairly well-acquainted with Plato's "Theory of Ideas", which characterizes the world of sensible particulars as the world of passing shadows, as contrasted to the world of immortal, immutable Ideas. The particular objects of our sense experience arise and then vanish in the flux of space-and-time; while Ideas, which are intelligible forms, endure eternally beyond space-and-time. No where has Plato identified his Ideas with particular objects of our ever changing world of sense-experience. Sinha has wrongly displayed Plato as a believer in the reality of particulars.

ii) It is a grave error to mention Plato's name along with that of Aristotle, as a believer in the reality of particulars. Students of ancient Greek Philosophy know very well that Plato's Dialectic is the veritable anti-thesis of Aristotle's Metaphysics. The world of our sense experience is described by Plato as a world of passing shadows, while the same world is represented by Aristotle as immensely vast expanse, where potentiality is ever striving to attain actuality. The charge of

Dualism which is usually levelled against Plato's philosophy is never directed against Aristotle's system. Therefore, it is not correct to reckon Plato along with Aristotle as a believer in the reality of particulars.

iii) Similarly it is erroneous to mention the name of Plato along with that of A.J. Ayer as a believer in the reality of particulars. As a matter of fact, A.J. Ayer is a modern British thinker, who has fallen in love with the philosophers of the Vienna Circle, in championing the philosophy of Logical Positivism, which lays particular emphasis on the verifiability Principle. Plato, who believed that "knowledge is reminiscence" definitely stands far far away from Ayer, to whom a true proposition is either directly or indirectly verifiable.

Sinha writes : "What we are affirming as a fact of some sort, may be described as choosing our conceptual schemes." (p. 454) "The questions about ontology can be interpreted as questions about the choice of conceptual schemes... the adoption of an ontology is nothing but simply a matter of choosing a conceptual scheme" (p.455) (*IPQ*. XXVII. 4)

As regards the statement in this quotation, two relevant questions can be raised : viz i) Is our own personal conceptual scheme, in every case (i.e. in the case of every person, educated as well as uneducated, enlightened as well as unenlightened) "chosen" by us ? ii) Has Quine asked us to choose between the conceptual schemes ?

As regards the first question as to whether, we in every case, "choose" our conceptual scheme, modern Psychology tells us that a large part of our intellectual content is just absorbed by us, without any reflection from our social ethos. Much of our conceptual scheme is a result of blindly accepted prejudices, rather than of carefully scrutinized opinions. Many of our beliefs come to us not through deliberate "choice" but through the subtle process of social suggestion. Many of our so-called intellectual "choices" are in fact, influenced and predetermined by our instinctive tendencies and unconscious factors.

As regards the second question, stated above, the following quotation from his essay, "On What There Is", goes to show clearly that Quine has not asked us to choose between the two conceptual schemes-viz the Phenomenalistic scheme and the physicalistic scheme. He himself boldly announces his preference

for the Phenomenalistic scheme :- "From among the conceptual schemes... the phenomenalistic scheme claims epistemological priority. From the standpoint of this epistemological scheme, the ontologies of physical objects and mathematical objects are myths. The quality of the myth is relative to our interest and purposes." (Page 206, in "*Semantics and the Philosophy of Language*." (Ed) L.Linsky.) These explicit words of Quine leave no scope for "choice", on which Sinha dwells.

In order to deal firmly and unerringly with thinker's ideas and thoughts, it is absolutely necessary to know his basic philosophical standpoint Sinha's exposition of Quine's views seems to suffer from a lack of a guiding thread. Hence, the element of puzzlement that a reader is likely to experience, while going through his article.

Of course, Sinha is on the right track, when he speaks of the pragmatic aspects of Quine's philosophy. "Quine's ontology, it seems to me is running under the line of pragmatic trend." These words on page 455 (*IPQ*, XXVII, 4) rightly indicate the shades of Pragmatism, which are unmistakably visible in Quine's speculation. But, Sinha, it seems, fails to notice the important fact that, in the background of these pragmatic shades lies Quine's unique vision of "Ontological Relativity."

A closer acquaintance with Quine's thinking tells us that, according to him, quite different accounts of what there is may be equally in accord with the available evidence. Just as different, apparently synonymous, terms may refer to the same thing or event, even so, different theories may accord well with the same mass of available evidence. They may present an equally enlightening account of the same cluster of puzzling facts. They may throw equally illuminating light on the selfsame area of puzzling experiences. In such cases, there is no sense in asking as to which of the theories represents the world as it really is. To every well conceived theory there can be one or more alternatives, which have an equal explanatory value, in the field of ontology. Relativity, in short, is inescapable in ontology.

In one place, Quine writes, "The conceptual scheme of science is a convenient tool for predicting future experience, in the light of past experience. Physical objects are conceptually imported in this scheme as convenient

intermediates, comparable epistemologically to the gods of Homer. I, of course, believe in physical objects and gods differ only in degree, not in kind. Both are cultural posits. The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to that of gods, because it has proved more efficacious for working a manageable structure into flux of experience." This remarkable passage enables us to have a proper understanding of Quine's ontological relativity.

Viewed against the background of this basic philosophical position of Quine, all the scattered pieces of information mentioned both in the present article and in Sinha's article can be seen to fall into a meaningful and instructive pattern.

A proper understanding of Quine's philosophical teachings can be of great help to us in getting the right perspective on the present day Western Philosophy. Sinha has, no doubt, made a sincere attempt to gain such an enlightened understanding of Quine's speculation - though the attempt seems to have faltered at quite a few important steps. But, in the extremely abstruse field of Philosophy such faltering steps are unavoidable. They should not deter anyone in his pursuit of knowledge concerning ultimate Reality and Truth.

Finally, it would be quite pertinent to end this discussion, with a summary of Quine's views (in his own words) concerning ontological commitment, as regards "what there is": "I have argued that we can use singular terms significantly in sentences without presupposing that there are entities, which these terms purport to name. I have argued further that we can use general terms, e.g. predicates, without conceding them to be names of abstract entities. I have also argued further that we can use utterances as significant.... without countenancing a realm of entities called meanings." (Quine. "On What There Is" reprinted in *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language* (Edited by Leonard Linsky). page 199).

S. H. KELSHIKAR

INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL QUARTERLY PUBLICATIONS

Daya Krishna and A. M. Ghose (eds) **Contemporary Philosophical Problems : Some Classical Indian Perspectives**, Rs. 10/-

S.V. Bokil (Tran) **Elements of Metaphysics Within the Reach of Everyone**
Rs. 25/-

A.P. Rao, **Three Lecturers on John Rawls**, Rs. 10/-

Ramchandra Gandhi (ed) **Language, Tradition and Modern Civilization**,
Rs. 50/-

S. S. Barlingay, **Beliefs, Reasons and Reflection**, Rs. 70/-

Daya Krishna, A.M. Ghose and P.K. Srivastav (eds) **The Philosophy of
Kalidas Bhattacharyya**, Rs. 60/-

M.P. Marathe, Meena A. Kelkar and P. P. Gokhale (eds) **Studies In Jainism**,
Rs. 50/-

R. Sundara Rajan, **Innovative Competence and Social Change**, Rs. 25/-

S.S. Barlingay (ed), **A. Critical Survey of Completed Reserach Work in
Philosophy in Indian University (upto 1980), Part I**, Rs. 50/-

R. K. Gupta, **Exercises in Conceptual Understanding**, Rs. 25/-

Vidyut Aklujkar, **Primacy of Linguistic Units**. Rs. 30/-

Rajendra Prasad, **Regularity, Normativity & Rules of Language** Rs.100/-

Contact : The Editor,
Indian Philosophical Quarterly,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Poona,
Pune 411 007.