

# ONTIC QUESTIONS

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Properties seminar

*Lessons from Quine's "On What there Is":*

**The ontological question is quantificational** Don't ask: "About these things, the universals: do they exist?" Ask rather: "Are there universals?" And in general: "Are there *F*s?"

**So don't ask it using names of disputed entities** E.g. don't ask "Does Redness [Pegasus] exist?" That presupposes that there is such a thing as redness. Ask instead: "Is there anything with such-and-such features [Is there anything that Pegasizes]?"

**Question of universals unsettled by simple predications** Just because we can say truly "The rose is red" doesn't mean that there is such a thing as redness.

**Universals are idle wheels** On the face of it, "there is this thing, redness, that is instantiated by the rose" doesn't explain the manifest facts better than the simpler "the rose is red".

**The game of paraphrase** Argument: "'Red' is meaningful; therefore, 'red' has a meaning—i.e., there is a meaning that is had by 'red'; this meaning could only be a universal". Quine resists by saying that 'Meaningful' ≠ 'having a meaning'.

**Believe the ontology of your best theory**

Our acceptance of an ontology is, I think, similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory, say a system of physics: we adopt, at least insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged. Our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the over-all conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadest sense; and the considerations which determine a reasonable construction of any part of that conceptual scheme, e.g. the biological or the physical part, are not different in kind from the considerations which determine a reasonable construction of the whole. (pp. 35–36)