

## U.T. PLACE

### *Lecture 3*

#### *Ontology*

The verb "to exist" and its synonym the verb "to be" (when it occurs alone without a predicative adjective or participle) stands for a concept - in so far as we can properly call it a concept - which is so fundamental to the logic of thought and language that no simple definition can hope adequately to characterise what it means or how it is used. The nearest we can get is to say that that which exists is part of the furniture of the universe, whereas that which does not exist and never has existed is a mere figment of our conception. This however is little more than an empty tautology, since the universe in this sense is defined as the sum total of all that exists, has existed and will exist. The only satisfactory way to approach the nature of existence is through an examination of the logical rules which distinguish existential and non-existential propositions and the truth conditions that apply in the case of the former.

#### *Only particulars exist (Aristotle)*

The principle that only particulars can be said to exist was first put forward by Aristotle<sup>(1a)</sup> in rejecting the Platonic doctrine according to which kinds or universals exist eternally as Forms or Ideas in a special universe of their own. According to Aristotle universals exist only *in rebus*, as the Mediaeval Schoolman used to say; that is they exist only in so far as particular instances of things of that kind exist.

#### *Existence and quantification*

Since we can only relate to something by bringing it under some concept and thus specifying what kind of a thing it is we are talking about, and since to specify what kind of thing something is is to classify it as a member of the class of things of that kind, it follows from Aristotle's principle that we cannot assert the existence of something without *ipso facto* asserting that the class of things of that kind has at least one member. By the same token to deny that something exists is to deny that the class of things of that kind has

any members. However, as we have seen in the case of numbers, it does not follow from the fact that we can quantify over things of a given kind, that things of that kind are particulars which can be said to exist in the sense with which we are here concerned.

*Existence is not a predicate (Kant)*

The reason given by Kant<sup>(5a)</sup> for thinking that existence is not a predicate is that to say something exists adds nothing to the description that has to be given in order to identify what it is that one is talking about. As he puts it "the real contains no more than the possible. A hundred real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers". Kant's point is put in another way by G.E. Moore<sup>(7)</sup> when he contrasts the "logical grammar" of the verb "exist" with that of the predicate "growl".

<b>Universal Affirmative</b>	<b>"All tame tigers growl"</b>	<b>"All tame tigers exist"</b>
<b>Universal Negative</b>	<b>"No tame tigers growl"</b>	<b>"No tame tigers exist"</b>
<b>Particular Affirmative</b>	<b>"Some tame tigers growl"</b>	<b>"Some tame tigers exist"</b>
<b>Particular Negative</b>	<b>"Some tame tigers do not growl"</b>	<b>"Some tame tigers do not exist"</b>

In this example, whereas all the "growl" forms make good sense, in the "exist" case only the universal negative and particular affirmative forms make sense. There is no use in language for the universal affirmative and particular negative forms. The reason for this is that when we use a predicate like "growls" we can apply it to all members of a given class (in this case the class of tame tigers), we can deny its application to any member of the class, we can assert its application to some or we can deny its application to others; by contrast in the case of "exist" we are concerned not with what is true of some or all members of a class, but with the question of whether, and if so, to what extent the class in question has any members. Here the particular affirmative form "some tame tigers exist" is used to assert that the class has at least one member and the universal negative form "No tame tigers exist" is used to deny that it has any members. The Universal affirmative form "All tame tigers exist" could only have a use if the number of members of the class were logically finite, that is if there were a limit to the number of members of the class tame tigers that there could conceivably be, and that limit had been reached - as in the case of the proposition "All the pieces belonging to this chess set still exist". Similarly the particular negative form "Some tame tigers do not exist" would only

have a use if the number of members of the class were logically finite and some of them were missing - as in the case "Some of the pieces belonging to this chess set no longer exist".

### *The contingency of existence*

The principle that existence is not a predicate is used by Kant to show that an existential proposition can never be analytic, i.e: true by definition, as is required by the ontological argument for the existence of God. It follows from this that no existential proposition can be necessarily true and hence that all existential propositions are contingent. It does not follow however, that all contingent propositions are either existential or have existential implications. Laws of nature, for example, are contingent in the sense that it is not self contradictory to deny them; but they are not existential nor need they be understood as implying the existence of particular instances to which they apply. However, since there would be no grounds for believing them to be true, if there were no instances to which they apply, they may be described as having a "quasi-existential" import.

### *Existence and reference (Frege)*

There is evidently a close logical connection between something that is the referent of a description in Frege's<sup>6</sup> sense and its existence. If nothing exists answering to the description in question, the description, though it may have a sense, fails to refer to anything. According to Frege the referent of a proposition is its truth value. I prefer to say that the referent of a proposition is the referent or referents of the descriptive expressions it contains. On this view only particular propositions with explicit or implicit existential commitments can refer to something. Furthermore, only if such a proposition is true can the reference be wholly successful. For if I point to an object, say a book, and say "this book is red" when in fact it is blue, the description "this book" taken by itself may succeed in referring to the object in question; but the complete proposition, implying as it does that there exists an x such that x is a book and x is red, describes a state of affairs which does not in fact exist in the context of referral and to that extent the proposition as a whole fails to refer.

*Particulars as the objects of sense perception (Plato)*

We owe to Plato<sup>(9)</sup> the recognition that sense perception only provides us with knowledge of particulars. In the *Phaedo* Plato uses this as an argument for the view that since the mind has knowledge of universals as well as of particulars, it must have acquired its knowledge of universals by a kind of extra-sensory perception before birth. Aristotle holding as he did that knowledge of universals is derived by abstraction from the knowledge we have of particulars through sense perception, agreed with Plato in so far as the particular nature of sense perceptual knowledge is concerned. But since he also held that only particulars can be said to exist, it follows from his view that there is an important connection between sense-perception and the knowledge that something exists.

*Esse-est percipi (Berkeley)*

Berkeley<sup>(10)</sup> held not only that we need to perceive something to be satisfied of its existence, but that only in so far as and so long as we perceive it can it be said to exist. This extreme view is certainly untenable. Nevertheless, we can certainly allow that we cannot be said to perceive something where the object of perception is something other than a proposition whose truth is thereby known, if that something does not exist. What we cannot say is that if it is not currently perceived then it does not exist. Moreover not only do we recognise the continued existence, when unperceived, of things that we have seen on other occasions or which we might have perceived, if circumstances had been different, we also acknowledge the existence of theoretical entities like the sub-atomic particles of modern physics which no one has ever directly perceived, nor indeed ever will. Nevertheless even in these cases the evidence of empirical observations is always of crucial importance in justifying our belief in the existence of such unobserved and unobservable entities.

*Independent existence and category of substance (Aristotle)*

An important element in Aristotle's<sup>(11)</sup> thought is the "distinction between logically independent and logically dependent" existence. One example of dependent existence is the existence of universals which depends on the existence of particular instances of things of that kind. However not all particulars have genuinely independent existence. Thus, particular instances of a property, such as redness can only be said

to exist in so far as there exists some particular light source or light reflecting surface which has the property of being red. Similarly, a particular light reflecting surface can only be said to exist in so far as there exists some material object of which it is a surface. A particular which has a logically independent existence, in the sense that to assert its existence does not presuppose the existence of anything else of which it forms part, is called by Aristotle a *substance*. Substances for Aristotle are such things as living organisms - a man, an animal, a plant, a human artifact, such as a hammer, a chair or motor car or a naturally occurring inanimate object like a stone or a heavenly body.

### *Metaphysical Materialism*

The doctrine of Metaphysical Materialism to which I subscribe holds that all substances in Aristotle's sense are and necessarily must be material substances. In other words, it denies the logical possibility of the existence of substances like God and the soul in so far as they are construed as non-material substances. A more extreme version of metaphysical materialism held by some philosophers of antiquity such as the Stoics hold that only material substances can be said to exist. This view however, is so inconsistent with the doctrine of substance as propounded by Aristotle, since it involves denying the existence of things like particular surfaces or particular instances of a given property which are not substances in Aristotle's sense since their existence presupposes the existence of other things of which they form part or of which they are properties. The form of metaphysical materialism to which I subscribe acknowledges the logically dependent existence of such a thing as parts, properties, processes, events, states and relations which are not substances in Aristotle's sense and which may or may not be described as material according to the criterion of materiality that is adopted.

### *Materiality and spatio-temporal extension and location (Descartes)*

Two accounts of what it is for a substance to be a material substance are considered. The view that a substance is material if it can be analysed into set of parts which are themselves material substances is rejected on the grounds there must always be at the minutest sub-microscopic level of analysis a set of parts, such as the sub-atomic particles of contemporary physics, which cannot be further sub-divided. Since they

cannot themselves be sub-divided into smaller units, which are themselves material substances, it follows by the definition that these ultimate units of analysis cannot themselves be material substances from which it follows that none of the units of the higher more macroscopic levels of analysis are material substances either. An alternative view to which I subscribe is that the materiality of a material substance consists, as Descartes<sup>®</sup> held, in its being both extended and located in space and time. On this view the independent existence of a substance is seen to depend on its having a clearly defined boundary in all three spatial dimensions which is maintained over time. This view also has the virtue of making sense of the notion of the different kinds of existence varying in the degree of solidity, substantiality or reality, which differentiates the existence of such things as geographical features, processes and substantial properties like colour, which share with substances the characteristic of being both extended and located in both space and time from the relatively insubstantial existence of such things as relations and dispositional properties which are located and extended in time, but neither extended nor located in space or such things as instantaneous events which are somewhat indeterminately located and extended in space and located but not extended in time.

### *Real and imaginary space time*

This view of the nature of materiality, combined with the form of metaphysical materialism to which I subscribe, implies that something can only be said to exist in so far as it is either both extended and located in both space and time or is a part, aspect, property or relation involving something which is so located and extended. This principle enables us to distinguish between most of the things of which we want to say that they actually exist as opposed to being merely something that we imagine or conceive of. There is however, a problem presented by the case of particular fictional individuals which are firmly located in both space and time, but where the spatio-temporal co-ordinates in terms of which the position of these individuals is located is partly or, as in the case of Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*<sup>(12)</sup>, wholly fictitious. Such individuals cannot be said to exist except in an imaginary or fictitious sense. In order to exclude such cases, we need to be able to draw a distinction between real space and time in which things can be said to exist in the full sense of the term and imaginary or fictional space/time in which things can be imagined to, but do not really, exist. The problem is not made any easier by the relativity of space and time first recognised by

Leibniz, but only to become generally accepted through the work of Einstein at the beginning of this century. As I see it, two principles are needed to distinguish real from imaginary space/time. The first is the principle which Kant<sup>(5a)</sup> states when he says that "we can represent to ourselves only one space" and "different times are but parts of one and the same time". In terms of the relative theory of space/time, as we now understand it, I take it that what this means is that the spatial position of any object that really exists and is thus part of the universe at any point in time, can in principle be specified in relation to any two other such objects and that the position of any event in the time series can likewise be specified in relation to any two other events provided their spatial separation is not so great as to introduce complications due to the interaction between time and space from the standpoint of observer. But the fact that real space and time form a closed interlocking system into which fictional systems of space and time cannot be introduced without giving rise to contradictions is not by itself sufficient to establish the reality of the one and the imaginary character of the other. A further principle is needed which draws attention to the measurement procedures which are used to determine the spatial and temporal location of objects and events which really exist and occur and which have no meaningful application in the case of their fictional counterparts.

### *The Existential Categories (Aristotle)*

The interpretation of existence in terms of location in space and time allows us to classify the various things of which it makes sense to say that they exist, into different kinds of categories according to the different ways in which they are anchored and distributed in space and time. Aristotle<sup>(1b)</sup> in his account of the categories attempts to give a list of such existential categories, as we may call them, beginning with the category of substance, whose existence we have seen, is distinguished by logical independence, in contrast to the second category, that of being a quality or property of something, whose existence depends on the existence of a substance whose quality or property it is. Unfortunately, in extending his list of categories, Aristotle includes space and time, which, on the view being argued here, are not so much fundamental categories of existence, as basic parameters of existence in terms of which different existential categories are distinguished. Aristotle also makes a mistake in the opposite direction, when he includes action and passion (in the original sense of undergoing or being acted on) as separate categories, whereas they are more properly

to be regarded as two different ways of construing the same kind of category of thing, namely an event or occurrence involving a change in the properties of something at or over time. Nevertheless, Aristotle's list of categories for all its defects, does appear to be a genuine attempt to provide a list of existential categories, that is, of the basic varieties of thing of which some kind of real or actual existence can be meaningfully asserted, unlike Kant's list of categories<sup>(6)</sup> which is a list of categories which serve to differentiate kinds of proposition or judgment, rather than the different kinds of existent to which propositions can refer.

In recent years, our understanding of the different kinds of existential category has been greatly increased by the work done by Ryle<sup>(7)</sup> and other philosophers in linguistic tradition on the "logical grammar" of psychological verbs. I refer here in particular to the work that has been done on the distinctive features of logical grammar, which differentiates verbs referring to *processes* from those referring on the one hand to *dispositional properties* and *continuous states* and on the other to *instantaneous events* distinguished according to their extension and non-extension over time and the presence or absence of continuous change during the period over which the state or process in question applies. See also Appendix on Existential Categories.

### References

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## Appendix

<i>Existential Categories</i>							
<i>Category</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Existence</i>	<i>Temporal</i>		<i>Spatial</i>		<i>Micro Reduction</i>
			<i>Location</i>	<i>Extension</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Extension</i>	
<i>Entities (Particulars)</i>							
(a) substances	organism, tool, building, pebble	independent	yes	yes	yes	yes 3D	yes
(b) features	nose, mountain, field	dependent	yes	yes	yes	yes 2-3D	Yes
(c) geographical points	Top of Mt. Everest	dependent	yes	yes	yes	no	no
(d) perceptible phenomena	Sound, optical image, rainbow	anomalous	yes	yes	anomalous	anomalous	anomalous
<i>States (Instances)</i>							
(a) substantial properties	patch of colour, clear/dirty condition	dependent	yes	yes	yes	yes 2D	yes
(b) dispositional properties	Horse-power, intelligence, flexibility	dependent	anomalous	yes	no	no	no
(c) relations	before, north of, parent-child	2x dependent	yes	yes	no	no	no
<i>Occurrences (Events)</i>							
(a) processes	melting, boiling, fabricating, moving	dependent	yes	yes	yes	yes 3D	yes
(b) instantaneous events	starting, stopping	2x dependent	yes	no	anomalous	anomalous	anomalous
<i>Collectivities</i>							
(a) aggregations	heap, crowd, cloud	dependent	yes	yes	yes	yes 3D	yes
(b) organisations	club, firm, city	dependent	anomalous	yes	anomalous	anomalous	yes
(c) types and kinds	book, play, proposition	dependent	anomalous	anomalous	no	anomalous	yes 2x

Anomalous = there is a puzzle