

ENS seminar – « Light Entities and Real Entities »
Handout no. 2 – May 6, 2009

« Being » - Some Contemporary debates

1. From Frege to Quine: “How the existential quantifier became existentially loaded behind our backs”

- Frege establishes the two main claims of the received view on existence: (1) **existence is a second-order concept or property** (a property of properties, not of individuals) (2) existence is to be reduced to the notion of **quantification**.

a. Frege: existence is a second-order concept

- But (1) as an expression of the so-called *second-order view* of existence is misleading: it is not that existence *as such* is not a property of individuals, but a property of properties (as if one could claim that such-and-such property *exists*). When one makes such claims as “Brad Pitt exists”, or “There are cats”, one is ascribing to some property the property of **being instantiated**, or *exemplified*.
- To say that cats exist is to claim that the property of being a cat is instantiated. And to say that unicorns do not exist is to say that the property of being a unicorn isn't: **existence is explained away**: “there is/are”, “exist(s)” have to disappear in the analysis, being substitutable in all contexts by “has instances” or something of the sort.
- To say that Brad Pitt exists is to claim that some property is instantiated. Which one? One could claim that Brad Pitt has the higher-order property of having some (first-order) property or other. The claim that “propertyhood” entails existence is called **serious actualism** (e.g. Plantinga's *The nature of Necessity*):

“Serious actualism is the thesis that it is not possible for an object to have a property without existing, that is, is the thesis that exemplification entails existence” (Linsky and Zalta [1994], “In Defense of the Simplest QML”, *Philosophical perspectives*, p. 437).

Serious Actualism entails that everything exists: to say that for any property P , x instantiates P iff x exists is to say that everything exists, if one takes objects just as property-bearers.

- “Brad Pitt exists” means just “Brad Pitt exemplifies properties”. So we are close to Kant and Hume: despite grammatical appearances, “exists” is not an ordinary predicate adding something to the concept of the object to which it applies. There is no self-sufficient property of existence.

b. Frege: existence is quantification

- Thesis (2) (existence is to be reduced to quantification) is notorious: in the *Ideography*, Frege introduces the notion (now symbolized as) \exists reading it just as “there is” or “is given” (*Es gibt*). But he calls the formulas that begin with the quantifier *existential* statements (*Existentialsätze*), describing them as sentences in which the property of having instances is ascribed to a concept.
- In the *Foundations of Arithmetic* Frege claims that *Existence*, like *number*, is a property of concepts, not of objects. Frege’s example: if one says “The emperor’s horses are four” one ascribes the property of being four, not to the horses singularly taken (as when one says “The emperor’s horses are black”). One ascribes the property of having four instances to the concept *emperor’s horse*. Analogously, when one claims “There are horses” one ascribes the property of having at least one instance to the concept *horse*.

c. Russell: existence is a property of propositional functions

- in the *Lectures on Logical Atomism* (p 90), Russell claims:

“If you say ‘Men exist, and Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates exists’, this is the same sort of fallacy as it would be if you said ‘Men are numerous, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is numerous’, because existence is a predicate of a propositional function, or derivatively of a class. When you say of a propositional function that it is numerous, you will mean that there are several values of that will satisfy it [...] If x, y, and z all satisfy a propositional function, you may say that that proposition is numerous, but x, y, and z severally are not. Exactly the same applies to existence, that is to say that the actual things there are in the world do not exist, or, at least, that is putting it too strongly, because that is utter nonsense. To say that they do not exist is strictly nonsense, but to say that they exist is also strictly nonsense.”

- Russell asks to compare two inferences:

Men exist	Men are numerous
<u>Socrates is a man</u>	<u>Socrates is a man</u>
Socrates exists	Socrates is numerous

and says that the same sort of fallacy is involved in both. So we should conclude that the conclusion is ungrammatical in both cases.

- How does the standard view deal with singular existential predications, such as “Pegasus does not exist”? Of which properties does one deny their being instantiated? Recall that non-denoting singular terms pose problems to Kripke’s **theory of direct reference**: for if the meaning of a proper name is exhausted by its bearer (the so-called **Millian view**), then empty names provide no semantic contribution to the sentences in which they occur. How can these sentences express complete propositions?
- Russell provided (a part of) the famous solution in *On Denoting...* (So famous it hardly needs rehearsing)

d. Quine: the criterion of ontological commitment

- Quine's two main contributions to the received view are (1) the extension of Russell's treatment to proper names, and (2) the development of the link between quantification and existence into a methodological slogan.
- As for (1), Quine begins from an epistemic problem: of which proper names we can *know* for sure that they denote? People do use names without knowing for sure whether there exists an object designated by them, or with the explicit intention of avoiding any commitment on that ("Yeti", "Vulcan" (the planet), "God", "Buddha"). Hence Russell's claim that only "this" or "that" count as logically proper names, etc.
- In *On What There Is*, Quine proposes that **proper names be reformulated so as to count as definite descriptions** "the author of the *Metaphysics*", "the philosopher who drank the hemlock", etc. If needed, we can even have ad hoc translations or coin new predicates, such as "the x that Pegasizes". Next, we apply Russell's treatment: to claim that Pegasus doesn't exist is to claim that there's no (unique) flying horse captured by Bellerophon, or that there is no (unique) x such that x Pegasizes.
- As for (2): Quine links quantification and existence in the famous slogan "**To be is to be the value of a (bound) variable**". Once descriptions and proper names have been paraphrased away, their use is not, by itself, existence-committing. Quine asks if there is nothing one can say which *does* commit one to the existence of something. There is:

"I have already suggested a negative answer to this question, in speaking of bound variables, or variables of quantification, in connection with Russell's theory of descriptions. We can very easily involve ourselves in ontological commitments by saying, for example, that *there is something* (bound variable) which red houses and sunsets have in common; or that *there is something* which is a prime number and larger than a million. But this is, essentially, the *only* way that we can involve ourselves in ontological commitment: by our use of bound variables. The use of alleged names is no criterion, [...] for I have shown, in connection with 'Pegasus' and 'pegasize', that names can be converted into descriptions, and Russell has shown that descriptions can be eliminated [...]. To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable." (W.V.O. Quine, *On What There Is*, pp. 12-13 of the reprint).

2. Back to the multivocity of "being"

- There are many well-known problems with the received view. Firstly, by embracing the thesis that one cannot refer to nonexistents, one is forced to give **systematic paraphrases**. People talk as if they referred to nonexistent objects. Either this is taken at face value, or not. The first horn is unacceptable for the Parmenidean. But nobody knows how to go through the second horn: one would have to paraphrase systematically, à la Russell-Quine, not only negative existential predications, but also any sentence including (apparent) reference to nonexistents. Not only this hasn't been done so far, but also, no one has any idea of how this *could* be done.
- Secondly, Kripke has abundantly shown that **proper names cannot be reduced to descriptions**: to begin with, there are the classic arguments to the effect that descriptions cannot provide the meaning of a name, although they can be used to fix the referent. Besides, names and

descriptions appear to behave quite differently with respect, e.g., to *de re* and *de dicto* modal contexts...

- Thirdly, the Russell-Quine paraphrase **delivers the wrong truth-values**: all sentences including (apparently) non-denoting terms turn out to be *false*; which goes against our intuition that some are *true* (Pegasus is a winged horse, Holmes is a detective living in Baker Street).

a. Meinongianisms and medieval accounts of quantification

- There is an alternative tradition for which **some things do not exist, and one can refer to them, think and talk about them.**

- Aristotle, for example, claims:

“One can signify even things that are not.” (*Analytica Posteriora*, 92b29-30)

- Meinongianism promises a *prima facie* simple treatment of the semantics of predications involving nonexistent entities. The simplicity comes from the *prima facie* intuitiveness of the underlying ontology.

- First, Meinongians **distinguish the *Sein* of objects – their existential status – from their *Sosein*, their having – certain – features or properties.** And Meinongians claim that an object can have a set of features even if it doesn’t exist. This is the so-called “**Principle of Independence**” (see A. Meinong [1969], *Über Gegenstandstheorie*, in Haller and Kindinger [1969-73] (eds.), *Alexius Meinong Gesamtausgabe*, Graz, Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt).

- Second, this intuition has a simple technical treatment. Primitive quantifiers, say, Λ and Σ (to be read as “for all” and “for some”) are taken as **existentially neutral**: one can quantify on, and talk in general of, nonexistents. **Existence is taken as expressible via a perfectly normal first-order predicate** – say, $E!$ – employed in order to provide explicit existential commitment and to define the existentially loaded quantifiers. “All existing things are such that...” is:

$$(1) \quad \forall x \alpha[x] =_{df} \Lambda x (E!x \rightarrow \alpha[x]);$$

and “There exists something such that...” is:

$$(2) \quad \exists x \alpha[x] =_{df} \Sigma x (E!x \wedge \alpha[x]).$$

- Meinong claimed “There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects” (Meinong [1969], p. 490). But this is not a flat contradiction at all, when one has distinguished the two couples of quantifiers – on the contrary, it is mirrored in everyday talk:

$$(3) \quad \text{“There is something which has been sought by many, namely the site of Atlantis, but it does not exist” (N. Wolstertorff [1961], “Referring and Existing”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 11: 335-49).}$$

(4) “I thought of something I would like to give you as a Christmas gift, but I couldn’t buy it for you because it doesn’t exist” (G. Priest [2005], *Towards Non-Being. The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Oxford, Oxford UP).

- One should notice that also **in classical logic we can have a perfectly good first-order existence predicate:**

(5) $E!x =_{df} \exists y(y = x)$.

It is only that in classical logic this is a “blanket” predicate (it is true of anything, since everything exists).

- That quantifiers must be existentially loaded is a recent invention. Medieval logicians took for granted that one can refer to, name, and quantify on, nonexistents – and make true claims on them. So the medieval theories of quantification also support Meinongianism.

- The standard theories of *suppositio* have it that “Some *Ss* are *Ps*” is true if and only if something that is actually *S* is *P*. However, the medievals also had a standard doctrine of *ampliation*: they claimed that what a term “supposits for” can be *extended* in (what we nowadays call) intensional contexts: modal and temporal contexts introduced by such expressions as “possibly”, “necessarily”, and by past and future verbal tenses.

- In this case, a term can refer not only to actually existing things, but also to mere *possibilia*, and also to past existents that do not exist anymore. So “Some *Ss* will be *Ps*” is true just if something that is or will be *S*, is or will be *P*: the domain of *suppositio* is extended to past and future objects.

- And the *suppositio* can be extended even further in (what we nowadays call) intentional contexts, that is, contexts, introduced by such expressions as “believes”, “thinks”, “hopes”, “searches for”, etc. Here is, for instance, the *Logica magna*, by Paul of Venice:

“Although the significatum of the term “chimera” does not exist in reality, still the term “chimera” supposits for something in the proposition “A chimera is thought of”, since it supposits for a chimera” (Paul of Venice, *Logica magna. Secunda pars*, ed. F. del Punta [1978], Oxford, Oxford UP).

Now a chimera is, for a Medieval, a metaphysically *impossible* object (for it’s a typical case of an entity composed of incompatible essences). So according to Medievals one can refer to impossible objects in intentional contexts (typically, the target of *de re* intentional attitudes).

- *Prima facie*, the simple Meinongian treatment seems to fare much better than the Russell-Quine analysis, for two reasons. First, there is **no need to introduce any paraphrase** in order to eliminate (what appear to be) non-denoting singular terms: no need to turn “The present king of France is bald” into “There is exactly one *x*, such that *x* ...”, etc., or to introduce Quinean *ad hoc* descriptions such as “the *x* that Pegasizes”. The grammatical surface of “The present king of France is bald” and of “Pegasus is a winged horse” can be taken at face value, treating the singular terms at issue as authentic names or descriptions, referring to nonexistent objects.

- Second, the analysis respects the aforementioned intuition that some claims concerning nonexistents can be true, whereas the Russell-Quine treatment makes all of them indiscriminately false. A sentence like:

(6) Ulysses is ϕ

will be true just in case the individual denoted by “Ulysses” is one of the things that make ϕ true (and we don’t need to engage in historical investigations to ascertain whether Ulysses existed before we can unfold the real logical form of (6)). Nonexistent things are capable of bearing (certain) properties, and of making some claims true and some other claims false: “Sherlock Holmes is a detective” and “The present king of France is a king” are true. “Pegasus is a pig” and “Homer Simpson lives in London” are false (the former is a winged horse, not a pig; the latter lives in Springfield, not in London).

b. Meinongianisms II: existence, subsistence, and nonexistence

- Another notable feature of Meinongianism – or some versions of it – is that it goes back to the distinction between different senses of being. For Meinong, some things *exist*, others *subsist*.
- Meinongians treat “exists” as primitive in the sense that it does not receive an explicit definition. However, the existent objects are the concrete entities of our everyday experience: tables, people, trees, etc. This is a hint to the effect that “to exist” in this sense means “to have causal powers” and/or “to be spatiotemporally located”.
- Of abstract objects such as functions, numbers, and concepts, Meinong claimed that they *subsist*. Subsistence seems to be kind of an inferior mode of being: subsistent entities are nowhere to be found in the physical world. Nevertheless, that they have this kind of being differentiates them from objects that lack any kind of being, such as merely possible (the golden mountain, Sherlock Holmes) and impossible (the round square cupola of Berkeley College) objects.
- In some other forms of Meinongianism (e.g. R. Routley [1980], *Exploring Meinong’s Jungle and beyond*, Canberra, RSCS, Australian national University; R. Routley [1982], “On What There Is Not”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, pp. 151-77) only concrete objects can exist, whereas abstract objects can neither exist nor subsist: functions and concepts are as nonexistents as merely possible and impossible objects.
- Overall, in Meinongian logics, *contra* the Quinean motto, to be (to exist) is *not* to be the value of a (bound) variable (see T. [1980], *Nonexistent Objects*, New Haven, Conn., Yale UP; E. Zalta [1983], *Abstract Objects: an Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics*, Dordrecht, Reidel).

c. Peter Geach: the two-sense use of “exists”

- Among the theories claiming that being is spoken of in many ways, one is worth mentioning for it combines the received “second-order” view of existence with the Meinongian

idea that existence is a first-level property. This is called the “two-sense” theory of existence, and one eminent proponent of it is Peter Geach.

- Usually, two-sense theorists start from the remark that *singular* existential statements are the hardest ones to paraphrase away in terms of instantiation of properties. One could agree that “Unicorns do not exist” means that the concept or property *unicorn* has no instances, and “There are cats” means that the concept or property *cat* is instantiated. But how could we deal with “Socrates exists” and “Pegasus doesn’t exist”? As Barry Miller says in the SEP:

“There are grave difficulties in regarding “Socrates exists” as “Socrates is instantiated at least once”. The problem is that individuals are not just the kind of thing that ever could be instantiated. Rather than being themselves instantiatable they are the kind of thing in which instantiations occur, e.g., wisdom is instantiated in Socrates, but Socrates himself cannot be instantiated in anything” (Miller [2002], § 5).

- So Peter Geach has proposed that “**to exist**” has two different uses: (a) the **actuality** use, and (b) the **there-is** use.

(a) In the actuality use, “exists” actually denotes a first-level property of objects. This happens when we utter singular existential statements, such as “Socrates exists” – which means something like: “Socrates is actual” (that is: he is a member of the actual world – as opposed to merely possible objects inhabiting nonactual possible worlds).

(b) In the there-is use, “exist(s)” is, on the contrary, expressing a second-level construct, the Fregean way: “Elephants exist” or “There are elephants” means: the concept *elephant* has instances.

- Overall: “exists”, as predicated of general *kinds* (properties, concepts), has one sense (the there-is sense, in which it means “has instances”); as predicated of individuals, “exists” has a different sense (in which it means “is actual”).

3. Van Inwagen, meta-ontology and existence [Ref. to van Inwagen’s paper “Meta-Ontology”]

- a. Meta-ontology as the analysis of the intension of “being”
- b. Meta-ontology as the methodology of ontology
- c. Being is not an activity
- d. The univocity of being: the argument from numbers