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EXISTENCE

Abstract

The question what really—ultimately, basically, and so forth—exists remains a fundamental question of philosophy. It is also, however, a prime example of how misleading it can be to try to answer a philosophical question without first taking pains to clarify it. In this case, clarification has turned out to be difficult and controversial, which leads to a meta-question: Is this apparently fundamental question—the ontological question—also a pseudo-question, a question that should be dissolved rather than solved? This paper argues for an answer that is somewhat Meinongian.

Keywords: existence, causality, reason relations

1. The question what really—ultimately, basically, and so forth—exists remains a fundamental question of philosophy. It is also, however, a prime example of how misleading it can be to try to answer a philosophical question without first taking pains to clarify it. In this case, clarification has turned

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out to be difficult and controversial, which leads to a meta-question: Is this apparently fundamental question—the ontological question—also a pseudo-question, a question that should be dissolved rather than solved? Or does careful clarification allows us to appreciate the true ontological stakes?

Reflection on these questions begins with two traditional criteria of existence, which I call the semantic and the causal. The semantic criterion is that whatever can be thought and talked about is real. If accepted, it also becomes a criterion of 'ontological commitment': we are committed to the existence or reality of what we take ourselves to be thinking or talking about. And this goes with the puzzling claim that 'exists'—contrary to appearance—is not a predicate.

The causal criterion is that if an object has causal standing it is real. It can be strengthened to a necessary and sufficient condition: So strengthened, I refer to it as the causal *condition* on existence. To have causal standing is to be an effect or have an effect, to cause or be caused, to act or be acted upon.

For this purpose we should understand 'cause' widely, not restricting it to our modern notion of a cause as something of which an intelligible, scientific account can in principle be given. The notion of causation relevant to the causal condition is the broad notion of productive power. Whether the scientific account exhausts that notion (or even captures any part of it) is a separate question. If, for example, as Kant suggested, noumena have the power to 'affect' phenomena in a non-natural way that lies beyond the scope of science, then the causal condition says that noumena are real. Equally, if God creates the world by some non-natural productive act of will, God is real; if Platonic forms somehow generate or produce or give rise to sensible appearances, they are real. If some normative realists believe that normative facts cause normative beliefs by a scientifically inexplicable productive relation, their view does not fall to the causal condition. In contrast, of course, if we think that the only intelligible causal relations are natural relations, relations that are objects of scientific inquiry, then the causal condition will lead us to conclude that all objects and facts are natural objects and facts. But the causal condition itself does not beg the question in favour of naturalism.

It has proved tempting to accept both the semantic criterion and the causal condition. That, in turn, poses challenges that have occupied philosophers. Apparently, for example, we refer to and think about numbers, or fictional objects, but numbers and fictional objects have no causal standing.

Yet if we accept both the criterion and the condition, this cannot be the case. Either we do not really refer to numbers or fictional objects, or else they have causal standing after all.

These difficulties lead many philosophers to reject the causal condition: specifically, to reject it as a necessary condition. I shall instead support the view that the semantic criterion should be rejected, while the causal condition should be accepted. However, my discussion here is not mainly about the case that can be made for this view. Rather, it aims to set out some of the view's implications—though doing so will suggest how certain arguments against it can be blocked.

In setting out the suggestion starkly, I am not forgetting the meta-doubts about whether any real question is at stake. Rather, I want to resist opposition on two fronts. On the one side are those who hold that the semantic criterion of existence should be accepted. On the other are those who hold that the search for criteria or conditions of existence is misguided, at least if this is thought of as a metaphysical question of 'ontology.' I come back to this scepticism about ontology in section 7.

2. Some matters of terminology should be settled from the start. So consider this statement:

> (1) There are characters in *War and Peace* who do not exist and characters who do.

Here 'exist' is used as a predicate to distinguish between the purely fictional characters and the real people who feature in the novel. Equally, however, 'exist' can be used, and often is used, to express the so-called existential quantifier. (I follow others in calling it the *particular* quantifier.) When it expresses the particular quantifier, 'Fs exist' has the same force as 'there are Fs'; 'a exists' then says that $(\exists x)(a = x)$. Call this use of 'exist' *the quantifier use*.

In the quantifier use, it is trivially true that whatever is referred to exists, since Fa entails $(\exists x)(Fx)$. On this use we have to substitute some other phrase for 'does not exist' in (1) – for example,

> (2) There exist characters in *War and Peace* who are not real and characters who are.

Both uses of 'exist' can be found in ordinary language. In this paper, however, I am *not* going to use 'exist' in the quantifier sense, but *only* as an ontological predicate with the sense found in (1). For the purposes of this paper, 'exists', 'really exists' and 'is real' mean exactly the same thing. Thus, when we say that Pierre is one of the characters in *War and Peace* who does not really exist, we are saying:

> (3) $(\exists x)(x$ is a character in *War and Peace* and x = Pierre and x does not exist).

I shall use the verb 'to be', as in (1), to express the particular quantifier, while denying that it has any ontological force. So I can agree with Quine that to be is to be the value of a variable; but I disagree that this has any ontological significance.

A major source of confusion here is that ordinary language has no systematic way of distinguishing the quantifier use and the ontological use. For example, to say that there still exist some difficulties to be solved in the planning proposal is not to make an ontological claim: it is the quantifier use. Equally, however, to say that these difficulties are *real*, or that they are not merely apparent but *really exist*, is not to make an ontological claim. Although this is a perfectly natural way to put it, it does not follow the convention I have stipulated. For the contrast between reality and appearance in this case pertains to objectivity, not ontology: to put it in terms of my convention, it does not merely seem that there are problems; there are problems. If, in contrast, we ask, 'Did Homer really exist?,' we are asking an ontological question.

Both a sceptic about ontology and an adherent to the semantic criterion will question the contrast I have just made. The sceptic will say that I am relying on an intuition about what is 'ontological' which cannot ground any such contrast. I shall come back to this scepticism in the final section. In contrast, someone who accepts the semantic criterion will say that there is no distinction to be made between merely quantificational and genuinely ontological uses of 'to be' and 'to exist,' so the distinction I have stipulated between these two verbs is empty. (1), (2) and (3) are all misleading. 'Exist' should not be regarded as a predicate, so we must find some other way of regimenting what (3) tries to express, which eliminates reference to a fictional character in *War and Peace* who has the name 'Pierre.'

3. Taken as an *ontological* thesis, the semantic criterion is that whatever one can think and talk about exists. It is, to put it mildly, hard to see what case can be made for such a Parmenidean claim.[1] On inspection, we see that the only condition that discourse about any topic must satisfy is that we know and can communicate to each other what we are talking about. We must be able to anchor the topics of our discourse by means of predicates they instantiate in such a way as to allow us to refer back to them and quantify over them. To get to the semantic criterion from this *anchoring condition*, there must be an inference from the sound point that successful reference requires the ability to identify what we are talking about to the conclusion that it requires that what we are talking about exists. And this inference seems completely gratuitous. You and I, for example, can discuss how attractive a character Pierre is. There is something we are both discussing and we both know what it is. We can discuss Pierre, refer back to the character we were discussing, disambiguate our reference where necessary by using a referential anchor such as 'the young idealist in Tolstoy's novel who gets involved with Free Masonry.' Pierre instantiates that description, but that does not entail that Pierre exists.

As the last remarks imply, there is something about which we are both talking *de re*—namely Pierre. However that does not imply that Pierre exists:

(4) $(\exists x)$(you and I are talking about x and x = Pierre and x does not exist)

seems straightforwardly true. So *de re* reference does not entail existence. There has to *be* a *res* about which we are talking; it does not follow that it has to *exist*. We can apply that to intentional identities:[2]

(5) The flying saucer Peter thought he saw is thought by Joseph to have landed in his field, but the air force thinks it does not exist.

What obstacle is there to the straightforward parsing?—

(6) $(\exists x)$(Peter thinks x is a flying saucer he saw and Joseph thinks x landed in his field but the air force thinks that x does not exist.)

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[1] I take the description of the semantic criterion as 'Parmenidean' from Priest (2009).

[2] Geach (1967).

Note that in this case we are not dealing with a fictional object but with what I will call a *putative real*. Or, rather, that is what we are dealing with on the assumption that the flying saucer in question does not exist. If the air force is wrong, then the flying saucer is not a putative real; it is real. In that case, the air force wrongly thinks, of something that exists, that it does not exist. The question whether the flying saucer exists or not is not settled by (6): it follows neither that the supposed flying saucer about which we are talking exists, nor that it does not exist.

4. Can we perhaps argue from the *theory of truth* to the semantic criterion? Consider the correspondence theory of truth, according to which a proposition is true just if it corresponds to a fact. Assume also that a fact consists in or supervenes on the possession of a property by some existent object, or the obtaining of a relation among some existent objects. Hence, on this theory, any truth entails the existence of some objects. We shall have to come back to the notion of fact, and to the truth of the correspondence theory of truth, but let us accept this reasoning for the moment.

Consider then:

(7) In the stories about him, Albert Campion lived in Bottle Street.

The reference is to a fictional detective and a fictional street, but the statement is true. In the Albert Campion mysteries, it is made clear that Campion lives in a flat in that street. So, by the correspondence theory, it is a fact that in the stories about him, Albert Campion lived in Bottle Street, and that fact must consist in or supervene on the instantiation of a property or relation by some existent objects. As indeed it does: in this case, it supervenes on facts about the writing of certain detective stories by an author and their reception by an audience.

None of this, however, entails that the references to Albert Campion and Bottle Street are merely apparent. They are genuine references to two non-existent entities. Note also that I might know (7) to be true, know it to be a statement about some novels, that is, to be about some fictions produced by an author, and still not know whether Bottle Street exists. Indeed, I might not know whether Albert Campion really existed, just as I may not know whether Prince Bagration, in *War and Peace*, really existed.

In similar fashion, the truth of (6) supervenes on facts about Peter, Joseph and the air force. These are real entities, whereas the flying saucer may not be. But whether or not it is, the reference to it is genuine. Truths about fictional objects and putative reals are truths about non-existent entities, but they are mind-dependent: They supervene on facts about existent minds.

5. So far, I would like to say that I have been following the tradition of Brentano, Twardowski and Meinong, rather than that of Quine. Contrary to Quinean orthodoxy, 'being presented' is not the same as existing. Twardowski and Meinong were right about that—but not, I think, about some other things. In particular, there is the question of merely possible objects. We should not, I believe, agree with them that such objects have being, because we should not agree that such objects are 'presented.'

Consider the following:

(7) The golden mountain is made of gold.

Is it true? If it is, it entails that there *exists* a golden mountain. That is because only what exists can be made of gold. Being made of gold is an *existence-entailing property*. So, since there exist no golden mountains, (7) is false or neither true nor false. But further, there *is* no golden mountain. In (7), the singular term 'the golden mountain' has no reference. True, there *might* have been a golden mountain, but it does not follow that there is one.

In contrast, suppose Peter believes that there exists a certain mountain made of gold. It is, he thinks, somewhere near Zurich, is owned by Swiss bankers, etc. In that case, we have an anchoring condition for a putative real: the golden mountain that Peter thinks exists, which he thinks is near Zurich, which he hopes to buy a share in. We might refer to it, whether or not we know it does not exist, as Peter's mountain. It is a putative real: $(\exists x)(x =$ Peter's golden mountain). However, it is still not true that Peter's mountain is golden, since being made of gold is an existence-entailing property. All that is true is that it is thought by Peter to be golden.

In general, we should draw a contrast between the actual and the possible, as well as the real and the irreal. Fictional objects and merely putative existents are actual but not real. The realm of the actual is the realm of what there is. Let us now stipulate that the term 'irreal' covers whatever

there is but does not exist. Then we can say that the realm of the actual consists exclusively of the irreal and the real.

Consider then the following exchange:

—You could have had children.

—They would have had a bad father.

Suppose both statements are true. It does not follow that there are 'possible objects' to which we are referring. There are no such objects. No possible children are 'presented' to us in this exchange. That is, there is no irreal object, a possible child, of which it is true, *de re*, that we are referring to it.

Equally, there could have existed a mountain which had the properties that Peter thinks Peter's mountain has. But here, too, in making that modal statement we are not referring to any possible mountain. There *is* no object which might have been a mountain and might have had those properties, including existence, of which we are speaking. I might say that Peter's mountain might exist, meaning it epistemically: for all I know, it exists. But if it does not exist, then it is false that it might have existed.

To put it another way, if Peter's mountain does not exist, it necessarily does not exist. This follows from the fact that if Peter's mountain is a merely putative real, then its property of being the object of Peter's thought is an essential property. Similarly, if we consider a possible world in which a detective called 'Sherlock Homes' exists, lives in Baker Street, etc., we are not supposing something about Sherlock Homes. Being invented by Conan Doyle would not be among such a detective's properties, whereas it is an essential property of Conan Doyle's fictional detective. Thus I agree with Kripke that actual objects that do not exist could not have existed.[3] Non-existence is an essential property of non-existent actual objects.

6. So far we have noticed two categories of irreality—purely fictional objects and putative reals. I believe there is a third, very important category of irreal objects of discourse: *normative objects* – the distinctively normative properties and relations about which we speak when we speak normatively.[4] I have argued elsewhere that all these properties and relations are reducible to what I call *reason relations*, so I shall speak only of these. Nothing hangs on

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[3] See Kripke (1981; 1972); also (2013).

[4] The assertions which follow are defended at length in Skorupski (2010). For a brief outline, see Skorupski (2012).

this: If there is an irreducible plurality of normative properties and relations, the ontological points I want to make would apply equally to them all.

Consider the following:

> (8) Were someone to experience undeserved suffering that it was possible to alleviate, that would be a reason to do so.

This says that a certain fact, were it to obtain, would be a reason to do a particular action. The fact would stand in that *reason relation* to the action. This seems to be a truth, and a purely normative—not a factual—truth.

The difference between a factual and a purely normative proposition is just that: to assert a factual proposition is to claim that some fact obtains, whereas to assert a purely normative proposition is *not* to assert that some fact obtains. Thus, whereas the claim that a fact obtains can—obviously—be true only if the fact in question does obtain, the truth of a purely normative assertion does not depend on the obtaining of any facts. Purely normative content is genuine content, true or false, but not factual content.[5]

What then is the status of the *reason relation* in which the fact stands to the action? If it were real, (8) would be a factual claim. However, denying that it is real does not entail that it is either a fictional object or a putative real. These latter two claims would correspond to two views in current meta-ethics—fictionalism and error theory—which both assume that purely normative assertions are factual assertions. The right response, I believe, is to insist that purely normative assertions are indeed genuine assertions about reason relations, with truth-apt content, but that they are not factual assertions.

Reason relations are irreal—but the contrast with fictional objects and putative reals is fundamental. Assertions about the latter are factual assertions, and the facts in question, if they obtain, do so because they supervene in part or whole on facts about minds. Thus, these assertions are assertions about mind-dependent facts. Purely normative assertions, in contrast, are not factual and not mind-dependent.

Reason relations are objective irreals, neither mind-dependent nor world-dependent. That is how they make knowledge of self and world possible. If they were real, they would just be some further items 'in the mind' or in the world 'outside the mind,' and the question of how the mind

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[5] This standpoint necessitates rejecting the correspondence theory of truth in favour of a minimalist theory.

knows the world, including these items in it, would remain opaque. If these points sound excessively dramatic, note that they simply follow from the basic claim that there are purely normative truths about reasons, and that they are not factual truths. We can quite innocently, without lurching into ontology, ascend an order and talk about the reason relations that feature in these truths about reasons. But equally, instead of saying that thought about the world is possible because reason relations are neither mind-dependent nor world-dependent, we could say that thought about the world is possible only because it is inherently responsive to normative truth, and because that responsiveness rests solely on spontaneity, in Kant's sense; i.e., as contrasted with receptivity. Irrealism about reason relations is implicit in this view of reason.

7. I come now to two sceptical reactions to the position on existence that I have sketched.

First, someone might ask whether there is more than a verbal difference between the position about existence that I have outlined here and platonism. "You mean by 'actual' (it might be said) what the platonist means by 'exists,' and you mean by 'exists' what the platonist means by 'has causal standing.'"

What then does the platonist say about fictional objects and putative reals? To have a perfect translation from our terms to his terms (is actual = exists; exists = has causal standing) he must say they exist, though they have no causal standing. There is then a serious question about why this position should be called platonist, since platonism is a position about abstract objects in particular.[6] In any case, most platonists are likely to go with common sense by denying that such objects exist. The semantic criterion then requires that apparent references to such objects must be paraphrased out—with all the difficulties that attend that project. Thus we do not have a perfect translation of the irrealist view—according to which, for example, there is a non-existent fictional character known as Sherlock Holmes about whom we can perfectly straightforwardly talk.

Secondly, someone might ask whether I am not, in describing reason relations as irreal, inviting metaphysical inflation. Saying that there are Fs, or that Fs exist, this person might say, are ways of talking that have various

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[6] I argue in Skorupski (2010) that abstract objects are objective irreals in the way that reason relations are; indeed, more strongly, that they are all reducible to reason relations.

unproblematic uses in various contexts. The mistake is to think that there
is some overarching *philosophical* question about whether Higgs particles,
numbers, reason relations, purely fictional characters or unresolved problems
'really exist.' These questions are first-order questions internal to their
respective domains of discourse. When we say that a character in a novel
really did exist (and was not just invented by the author), we are saying
one thing; when we say a problem really exists and is not just an apparent
problem, we are saying another. When we say that there exist two prime
numbers between 16 and 22, we are saying a third, and when we say that
Higgs particles really exist, we are saying a fourth. The beguiling idea of
a single 'world,' or 'reality as a unified domain,' is a will o' the wisp. There
is no such thing as a criterion of 'ontological commitment'—that phrase
means nothing. Ontology should be swept away as a pseudo-subject. What
then remains, as is especially clear on the minimalist view of truth, is a mere
tautology: it is true that there are Fs if and only if there are Fs.[7]

On this view, the term 'realism' (as well as the term 'irrealism') should
be discarded from meta-normative debate, since *both* suggest that some
significant 'ontological' question is at stake when we ask, for example,
whether there are three distinct reason relations or just two.

I have considerable sympathy for this view; I would be happy to
dissolve, rather than resolve, the debate between realism and irrealism.
But I am afraid this would be too quick. For we do, it seems to me, have
a conception of unified 'Existence,' or 'Reality.' It is not a philosophical
construct; it is integral to our thinking. If a quantum physicist or
a metaphysical theologian gives a public lecture entitled "The Nature of
Reality," examining the fundamental structure of matter, or its relation to
mind and God, we understand perfectly well what they are talking about and
why they give their lecture its title. We do not accuse them of leaving reason
relations out, or of treating reality as though it were a single domain. We think
reality *is* a single domain, and we are deeply interested in its ultimate
constituents. Reason relations are not part of the Nature of Reality—not
Constituents of Existence—when 'Reality' and 'Existence' are so understood.

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[7] This is the view T. M. Scanlon takes in Scanlon (2013), except that he wishes to
retain a role for ontology and thus thinks my remark about sweeping away ontology
(in Skorupski 2010) *too* sweeping (Scanlon, p. 24). However by 'ontology' I meant
a unified theory of 'ontological commitment', as envisaged by Quine, and Scanlon agrees
that there is no such theory.

A strategy that seeks to treat the question whether reason relations are real or irreal as a mere pseudo-question fails to take this important aspect of our notion of reality, or 'the world,' seriously.

Existence in this sense is causal standing, in the wide sense of 'causal' that we have discussed. Not that 'exists' *means* 'has causal standing.' Rather, when we use the word 'existence' in a certain way, what we are referring to is causal standing. That existence, understood in this way, is causal standing is an a priori but not an analytic identity.

8. What then if some metaphysician insists that reason relations are causally inert existents in just this sense of 'existence?' A fundamental difficulty remains for such a position. Knowers can cognise existents distinct from themselves only through some form of receptivity—be it scientifically describable, metaphysical or magical. But reason relations are not known in any such way. Our knowledge of them is not based on any form of receptivity, in the Kantian sense referred to in section 6, but derives from spontaneity alone. It follows from the pure spontaneity of normative knowledge that its objects are irreal; but crucially, in the absence of assumptions about existence and truth that have been rejected here, it does not follow that they are subjective.

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