

EXISTENCE AS A REAL PREDICATE

EXISTÊNCIA COMO UM PREDICADO REAL

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RESUMO – A construção de “existe” como um predicado de primeira-ordem ou real é defendida contra a ortodoxia prevalente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Existência. Modalidade. Referência. Tempo.

ABSTRACT – The construal of ‘exists’ as a first-order or real predicate is defended against prevailing orthodoxy.

KEYWORDS – Existence. Modality. Reference. Time.

Russell held that existence, in the only sense of that word which matters to logic, is not a “real” predicate – that nothing, I mean no *thing*, can possibly have the property of existing. As he puts it, ‘to say that *A* exists means that *A* is a class which has at least one member’ (Russell, 1905: 486): existential statements, taken extensionally, are statements about classes (about their being empty or otherwise); in the intensional idiom of *Principia Mathematica*, they are statements about propositional functions (about their satisfaction). What they *never* are is plain, first-order, statements about things. And, of course, in all such matters Russell was, on the face of it, following a venerable tradition, which goes back at least to Kant’s criticism of the Ontological Argument and may have reached its highest point, with respect to clarity of both purpose and method at any rate, in Frege’s *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*.

For all that, when fifty-some years past the publication of ‘On Denoting’ Saul Kripke introduced model-theoretic semantics for normal modal systems, it came out as perfectly natural for him to have a first-order predicate ‘exists’. In the kind of logical systems envisaged by Kripke, we may as well express the statement that *A* is a non-empty class (*i.e.*

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that $\exists x x \in A$), or that the propositional function F is satisfied by at least one individual ($\exists x Fx$), as the statement that *a particular individual*, say George W. Bush, exists. The latter we may write, to keep in view the difference in order levels, thus: Eb (see, e.g., Kripke 1963).

On the face of it, here is a plain question worth pondering: how did Kripke manage to find natural and non-problematic that which Kant and Frege (and Russell and Carnap and eventually everybody) had taught us to reject as nonsense? What happened, as it were, in the meantime?

A glance at the line of descent which comes from the Theory of Descriptions down to the doctrine of rigid designation will provide part of what I need to answer (or anyway, to submit an answer to) that question. An examination of some differences between the referents of Russellian proper names and those of Kripkean rigid designators will complete the materials out of which I will sketch my modest defense (well, call it defense) of Russell.

Begin at the beginning, said the King to the White Rabbit. Now the beginning in philosophy is where we find ourselves, and that is usually some confusion or other, not always of a benign character. To such confusions the history of philosophical ideas is no more immune than are those ideas themselves. Witness the set of ideas we are now used to associate with such lingo as 'direct reference', 'rigid designation', 'de re modalities' and the like. They are usually – and, I hasten to add, overall rightly – associated with the names of some authors who made their appearance on the philosophical scene in the 1960s, like Kripke or Donnellan; yet their origins are demonstrably traceable to Russell's philosophy – more specifically, to the role played by Russell's ideas in the dispute raised by Quine about the interpretation of quantified modal logic.

Quine held that modal contexts violate the Leibnizian principle of Substitutivity of Identity (cf. Quine 1943, 1947). In their replies to Quine, Arthur Smullyan (1947, 1948) and Frederick Fitch (1948) countered that the criticism made *tabula rasa* of the distinction between names and descriptions. To be sure, co-extensive *descriptions* are not exchangeable in modal contexts: even if the man who denounced Catiline is actually the same man who wrote the *Tusculans*, it remains true that the man who denounced Catiline *might* not have written the *Tusculans*: after all, Cicero might not have done any or both of these. Yet, as both Smullyan and Fitch stressed, Cicero could not have failed to be *Cicero*, the particular man he actually was – even though, to be sure, he might not have been *named* 'Cicero'. Proper names, in a word, are not descriptions – and descriptions are not genuine singular terms but rather (as indeed Russell

had shown) incomplete symbols. And, unlike descriptions, co-referential proper names *are* exchangeable in modal contexts. So long, then, as we keep in view the distinction between names and descriptions, in the spirit of Russell's Theory of Descriptions, modal contexts cease to look referentially opaque, as Quine held them to (inveterately) be.¹

The idea provided a key to the interpretation of a result obtained by Ruth Barcan (since Marcus) in 1947. She proved (for a quantificational extension of Lewis's system S4), that for every x and y , if $x = y$, then *necessarily* $x = y$.² That result, to be sure, is of no immediate consequence whatsoever for proper names or other kinds of singular terms in ordinary language: Marcus's proof concerns the admissible values of bindable first-order variables in her system. It nevertheless strongly suggests a picture of such variables as being (relative to each value assignment, anyway) exemplars of the kind of terms Kripke would call 'rigid designators'. And it is an extension of that view which would eventuate, ten years after, in the main thesis of what is nowadays often called the "New Theory of Reference": that genuine singular terms are rigid designators.³

That being said, the most interesting feature of Smullyan's and Fitch's arguments is not the use of Russell's technique of incomplete symbols, but the fact of their assuming, against *both* Quine and Russell, that there is after all a non-empty class of genuine singular terms which, as Scott Soames puts it, behave exactly like Russellian logically proper names, except that their referents are not restricted to objects of Russellian acquaintance (cf. Soames 1995: 196).

My opening question may at this point be rephrased thus: what does it take to assume that *there is* such a non-empty class of genuine singular terms, sharing with Russellian proper names their logical properties yet able to refer to entities we are not – and, in Russell's very strict sense, cannot possibly ever be – acquainted with?

It's in the answer to that question, I think, that the key is to be found to understand why it is not after all any *less* natural to say, of the referent of a Russellian logically proper name, that its taking the argument-place

¹ At the end of the day, all that Quine managed to show was that *descriptions* cannot be exchanged *salva veritate* in modal contexts. From which, however, *nothing* at all follows for singular terms, precisely because descriptions are not singular terms.

² See [Marcus] 1947. All that the proof requires, in addition to the Leibnizian principle of Substitutivity of Identity, is the truism that every object is necessarily identical to itself. See the remarks by Marcus in her 1961 and by Kripke in 1971.

³ I mean, in particular, Kripke's modal argument, which hinges on the truth assignments of sentences containing no modal operators in different counterfactual situations ("possible worlds") – as in the famous example featuring Nixon, the man who won the 1968 Presidential elections in the U.S.A.: it is *Nixon* we are talking of when we stipulate the situation in which, contrary to what actually happened, he would have lost the elections: see Kripke 1980: 40-49.

of the function x *exists* results in a tautology (and that, correspondingly, a contradiction is the outcome of its taking the argument-place in x *does not exist*) than it is to ask, of the referent of Kripkean rigid designator – say, to begin with, of an ordinary proper name – whether it exists, still exists, has ever existed, will go on existing.

It's very deliberately that I bring these verbal tenses into the picture. For what at the end of the day will make all the difference is the way we think of the relations between existence and time. Or so, anyway, I will argue.

By the end of the 1970s the “New Theory of Reference” had gained wide acceptance, and Quine's protests against “Aristotelian essentialism” were beginning to sound like relics of bygone days in the history of analytic philosophy. That was when Dagfinn Føllesdal sketched, as part of an attempt at a critical evaluation of the story I have just so hastily abridged, something which it would not be wholly improper to call a *deduction* (in the Kantian sense of that word) of the need for singular terms.⁴ Føllesdal's starting point is the very general notion of an *object*, and of the world as consisting of objects some of which, at least, are apt to undergo change. Three features of that notion come to the forefront as crucial for the understanding of singular reference:

- (1) Objects, in Husserl's phrase, *transcend our knowledge*: they have properties which we do not know, which we are likely never to know; yet our ignorance does not debar us from thinking and speaking of these imperfectly known objects.
- (2) Objects (with the exception of mathematical and other abstract objects, whatever there may be) *change*: they acquire and lose properties in the course of time, all the while preserving their identities – which is what enables us to keep thinking of them, recognizing them in successive encounters, *tracking* them through the changes they undergo.
- (3) Last yet not least, we are *fallible*: we have false beliefs, which we seek to correct; yet all along the process of revision, our changing beliefs keep being *about* the same objects (else there would be no point in saying that we changed our minds: we would rather have changed the subject, as when you move from wondering what blowup algebras are about to recalling the final scene of Antonioni's *Blowup*).⁵

⁴ Føllesdal's proposal is apposite here, it will be seen, for the light it sheds (by way of similarities as much as of dissimilarities, as Wittgenstein would say) on Russell's conception of an *individual*.

⁵ Føllesdal 1986: 107-109. (The trite example is my own embellishment.)

The “deduction” culminates in the conclusion one would have expected: a language apt to express thoughts about objects which (1) transcend our knowledge, (2) undergo change, and (3) are such that we are often mistaken about them *must* contain a category of expressions apt to “hook onto” their objects and abide with them through time and its accidents. Singular terms, in other words, allow us to *track* objects through changes, in the objects themselves as in our epistemic situation with respect to them.⁶

And that is how it comes out so natural (as natural it is, indeed) to predicate existence of an object. Wherever there is time, wherever there is change, wherever there is generation and corruption, it is perfectly sensible to ask of an object whether it exists, has existed, keeps existing, *can* exist. Recall the Kripkean characterization of rigidity: a term *t* is the rigid designator of an object *a* if and only if *t* designates *a* in all possible worlds in which *a* exists (if it exists at all), and no other object in any possible world. (Why is it that Sherlock Holmes *could not* possibly have existed? Because the name ‘Sherlock Holmes’, as we use it, fails to designate anything in the actual world and, being rigidly used, designates nothing in every possible world. It is for the very same reason, let me add in passing, that *there could not be* such things as unicorns; their existence is just an impossibility – but maybe unicorns we better leave for another time.⁷)

I have argued that two conditions must be met for existence to behave as a real (or, if you like, a first-order) predicate. First, we must be in a position to genuinely *name* objects, as opposed to designate them *by description*;⁸ for if we were only able to think of objects under some description or other, existence could only be a “logical” predicate in Kant’s

⁶ In a more detailed account I would take some space here to argue for the (nowadays pretty unoriginal, yet fiercely resisted in many quarters) claim that singular *reference*, hence the semantics of singular terms, is parasitic upon singular *thought* – that it is, in other words, our capacity to single out objects in thought which underlies the linguistic phenomenon of singular reference, and not the other way round. The recovery for analytic philosophy of the priority of thought over language, after over half a century of linguistic philosophizing, dates back to the early 1980s; the posthumous publication of Gareth Evans’s book *The Varieties of Reference* (1982) can be fairly described as its cornerstone. Yet bad ideas die hard. I hope to elaborate on the allure of “logocentrism” elsewhere.

⁷ Although I cannot resist calling attention to the best philosophical discussion of the topic that I know of (even if there is much in it which I am not prepared to endorse), Dummett 1983.

⁸ Russell is as clear-sighted as one might wish about the difference; see, e.g., his informal presentation of the criterion for a term to qualify as a (logically) proper name: ‘Whenever the grammatical subject of a proposition can be supposed not to exist without rendering the proposition meaningless, it is plain that the grammatical subject is not a proper name, *i.e.*, not a name directly representing some object.’ (Whitehead & Russell 1910: 66).

sense, rather than a real one. Second, there must *nameable* objects; and I have just hinted at what that implies.

Now all that story about time and change and cognition is, to be sure, wholly absent from the ostensible framework of the Theory of Descriptions, although, and here is something I make a point of stressing, not in the least foreign to Russell's thinking – witness 'The Existential Import of Propositions' (RUSSELL 1905). There Russell speaks of a sense of 'exists' which is to be found 'in philosophy and ordinary language', and contrasts it to another, which he calls 'purely technical' and claims (justifiably enough at the time he was writing) to be the only one in which that notion occurs in 'symbolic logic'. In that latter sense, 'A exists' is to be understood as 'A is a class which contains at least one member'. In other words, in the "technical sense" existence is a second-order predicate. The other, nontechnical, sense is, to be sure, 'the meaning in which we inquire whether God exists, in which we affirm that Socrates existed, and deny that Hamlet existed' (RUSSELL 1905: 486). Now Russell not only does not care to present the "technical" sense as providing an analysis or clarification of what is meant by 'exist' in 'philosophy and ordinary language'; he goes so far as to deny that there is any shared meaning here, presenting the duality of senses as an instance of plain ambiguity:

The first point in regard to which clearness is essential concerns the meaning of the word "existence". There are two meanings of this word as distinct as stocks in a flower-garden and stocks on the Stock Exchange, which yet are continually being confused, or at least supposed somehow connected. Of these meanings, only one occurs in philosophy or in common parlance, and only the other occurs in mathematics or in symbolic logic. Until it is realized that *they have absolutely nothing to do with each other*, it is quite impossible to have clear ideas on our present topic. (RUSSELL 1905: 486, my italics, PF)

This is apt to sound deeply puzzling. When Kant or Frege denied that existence was a property of objects, the denial was explicitly offered as an explication of the use of 'exist' 'in philosophy and ordinary language'. In particular, the language of quantification theory as Frege devised it should enable one to express perspicuously (*i.e.* as "logical" or second-order predication) what would get misleadingly expressed (in the guise of "real" or first-order predication) in ordinary language. Indeed, Russell's startling claim that the two senses have nothing to do with each other does not even begin to make sense until we realize that the ontological counterpart to that semantical distinction is a distinction between *two kinds of objects*. Thus he notes, commenting on the nontechnical sense

(that in which we deny that Hamlet existed): ‘The entities dealt with in mathematics do not exist in this sense: the number 2, or the principle of the syllogism, are objects which mathematics considers, but which certainly form no part of the world of existing things. This sense of existence lies wholly outside Symbolic Logic, which does not care a pin whether its entities exist in this sense or not.’ (*Ibid.*). What Symbolic Logic ‘does not care a pin’ for is, to begin with (although, as the remainder of the section just quoted makes clear, not exclusively) existence *in time*. Thus Russell adds, now referring to the “technical sense” of ‘exist’: ‘In this sense, the class of numbers (e.g.) exists, because 1, 2, 3, etc., are members of it; but in sense (a) the class and its members alike do not exist: they do not stand out in a part of space and time, nor do they have the kind of super-sensible existence which is attributed to the Deity.’ (*Ibid.*)

What the distinction may be, if any there is, between ‘the kind of super-sensible existence which is attributed to the Deity’ and that of abstract objects which are not classes, like the principle of syllogism or the logical constants, I will not conjecture here. All I am claiming on Russell’s behalf is that there is more to his denial that existence as a second-order predicate has anything to do with the ordinary sense of ‘exist’ than meets the eye. Actually – let that stand as my main claim – if anything along the lines of Føllesdal’s “deduction” is on the right track, Russell may have seen closer into the truth (if, as usual, through a glass darkly) than did either Kant or Frege.

In the years that were to follow the publication of ‘On Denoting’, the technique of incomplete symbols would be pressed into service to dispose of classes, and the extensional approach of ‘The Existential Import of Propositions’ would give way to the wholly intensional one we find *Principia Mathematica*: existence (in the “technical” sense) is now a predicate of propositional functions, and of nothing else.

Russell’s efforts, in the years following the publication of *Principia*, to provide his ‘no-classes’ version of logicism with an epistemological foundation would notoriously eventuate, under the influence of Wittgenstein’s tenacious insistence in keeping logical analysis free of epistemological speculations, in the rediscovery of a metaphysical view long before entertained by Plato.⁹ Nearing the end of the *Theaetetus*, in a famous and endlessly intriguing section, Plato has Socrates say, about the proposal that being backed by an account (*logos*) is what distinguishes knowledge from mere true judgment:

⁹ On Plato’s “logical atomism” see Ryle 1990 and McDowell 1969-70.

In my dream, I thought I was listening to people saying that the primary elements, as it were, of which we and everything else are composed, have no account. Each of them, in itself, can only be named; it is not possible to say anything else of it, either that it is or that it is not. That would mean that we were adding being or not being to it; whereas we must not attach anything if we are to speak of the thing itself alone. Indeed we ought not to apply to it even such words as 'itself' or 'that', 'each', 'alone' or 'this', or any other of the many words of this kind, for these go the round and are applied to all things alike, being other than the things to which they are added, whereas if it were possible to express the element itself and it had its own proprietary account, it would have to be expressed without any other thing. As it is, however, it is impossible that any of the primaries should be expressed in an account; it can only be named, for a name is all that it has. But with the things composed of these, it is another matter. Here, just in the same way as the elements themselves are weaved together, so their names may be woven together and become an account of something – an account being essentially a complex of names.¹⁰

In *Philosophical Investigations* § 46, Wittgenstein – here, as elsewhere, a much keener and more of a scholarly reader of other philosophers than is usually acknowledged – raises the question: 'But what lies behind the idea that names really signify simples?'. And, upon quoting extensively – by way of an answer, as it were – from that section of the *Theaetetus*, he remarks: 'Both Russell's 'individuals' and my 'objects' (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) were such primary elements.'¹¹

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¹⁰ *Theaetetus* 201e-202b, translated by Jane Levett, in Burnyeat 1990: 338-339.

¹¹ Wittgenstein 1953: 18-19.

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