

## IS EXISTENCE NEVER A PREDICATE?

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My aim in this paper is a very modest one. I want to discuss the doctrine that existence is not a predicate, in connection with two particular classes of utterances. The discussion of both types of case will seem at first to harmonise well enough with this doctrine. But at the end I shall try, certainly not to *confute* the doctrine, but to unsettle it just a little, to show that it must be taken in a slightly less simple way than we might be inclined to suppose.

I begin by considering spoken or written utterances of sentences containing the singular names of fictional or mythical characters as these occur in the actual telling of the story or recounting of the myth. In approaching the discussion of these, I shall make a certain assumption regarding a different class of utterances, namely those in which definite identifying reference is made to actual historical individuals. I shall take it as understood that the existence of the individuals referred to in such utterances is presupposed, rather than implicitly asserted, in the making of such utterances.

Evidently, when fictional or mythical names are used in the kinds of utterance I mentioned —i.e. in the telling of the story, the recounting of the myth— one is not, in so using them, making successful identifying references to historical particulars, to actual men or gods. Yet the predicates attached to such names may be, it seems, of just the same general sorts as are attached to the designations of men in true-or-false statements in which men are identifyingly referred to. There was a time when some philosophers felt

the need to produce analyses of sentences containing such fictional or mythical names, analyses which would, for example, have the character of straightforwardly true-or-false reports of what was to be found in certain books. Apart from such obvious stumbling-blocks as the fact that this form of analysis could scarcely be applied to those sentences in which the fictional names made their first appearance, we may well now feel that any such programme of analysis was unrealistic. Even more unrealistic would be any account of such sentences which represented them as all false on the ground that they implied false existence-claims, or which denied them a truth-value on the ground of reference-failure on the part of the singular terms. (We may indeed deny them —or some of them— a truth-value; but not on *this* ground.)

What makes any thorough-going account of any of these kinds seem unrealistic is the recognition that, in the case of sentences containing such names, we typically have uses of language which are quite simply *different* from those uses involved in the important business of stating, or trying to state, empirical facts. They are themselves many and various, these different uses; but we can say that many of them cluster round the central notion of telling, or re-telling, a story. The linguistic forms of these uses of language are taken over, complete, from the fact-stating uses; and the linguistic *functions* of the fact-stating uses are, as it were, reproduced, story-wise, within the story-telling uses. One of the functions there reproduced is that of identifying reference, often, though not only, performed by the use of names; only, of course, the reference is to characters in the story, not to people in the world. Where you have identifying reference, you have also, presuppositions of existence; only, of course, the presuppositions of existence are, like everything else in this realm of discourse, governed by the unspeakable rubric —‘*in the story*’. Of course, I am here saying nothing new, but simply sketching a general, and a special, reminder. In general, it is undesirable to treat sentences

belonging to one way of using language as if they embodied attempts —attempts which straightforwardly fail or tortuously succeed— to use it in another. In special, there is no reason to deny that story-telling uses of language may have their own style of identifying reference, that fictional names may simply be used to refer, story-wise, to fictional characters.

However, when we say 'Don Quijote is a fictional character', we clearly aren't using 'Don Quijote', *story-wise*, to refer to a fictional character. That Don Quijote is a character in a story is not part of the story of Don Quijote. Nor is it part of the legend of King Arthur that King Arthur is a legendary king. In general, we have here a set of occurrences of such names which do not seem straightforwardly amenable to the treatment I have just suggested. Logicians, with their characteristic parsimoniousness of examples, have generally picked from this set the single phrase, 'did not exist', or, rather, the less likely 'does not exist', and concentrated their attention on it, together with its working partner, 'exists' or 'did exist'. King Alfred existed, King Arthur did not; Bucephalus exists, Pegasus does not. Just as we cannot say, of the negative forms, that the names are being used, story-wise, to make identifying references to fictional characters, so we cannot say, of the affirmative forms, that the names are being used, in the manner of ordinary factual discourse, to make identifying references to horses or men. A story-wise identifying reference carries a presupposition of story-wise, as opposed to factual, existence. An identifying reference in one of the language-games of factual discourse carries a presupposition of factual, as opposed, to story-wise, existence. Where what follows the name, as in my examples, is a serious and substantial affirmation or denial of factual existence, we cannot coherently cast the name for either of these roles. Consequently, we cannot coherently construe 'exists' as functioning predicatively *relatively to the name taken as having either of these roles*.

There are, one might say, two types of classical solution

here, two classical models for interpreting our sentences. For the sentence, "King Arthur never existed", one model is provided by such a sentence as "There is no king of Britain who even roughly answers to the descriptions associated with the name 'Arthur' in Arthurian legend". The second model gives us something like "The concept 'King Arthur' is not instantiated." (There are variations on the second model.) The first model replaces 'exists' with a quantifier and the name with a complex general term in 'predicative position'<sup>1</sup>. The second model offers us a definite singular term in 'referential position'<sup>1</sup>, but one which refers to a concept, not a character; and replaces 'exists' with, or construes it as, a predicate-expression signifying a property of concepts, viz. being instantiated.

Must we accept such models as these? (or accept them for every such case?) The exercise I want to propose is that of inquiring whether we could not find another model which would preserve a predicative role for 'exists' *without* casting the subject-expression for the somewhat ungrateful role of singular terms referring to a concept. This is, perhaps, a slightly pedantic (scholastic) exercise. But there seems to be life in it. A recent article in the *Phil. Review*<sup>2</sup> was devoted to denying that such a thing could be done in these cases. In any case there is always something to be said for poking a stick into a dogma.

I approach the question obliquely, by raising the topic of my second class of utterances. We are to forget, for the moment, about definite singular terms. Presuppositions of existence are not confined to them. I want, adapting freely from G. E. Moore's discussion of tame tigers,<sup>3</sup> to remind you of some things he pointed out and to point out some others which he didn't. The sentences

<sup>1</sup> The phrases are Quine's.

<sup>2</sup> W. Alston, *Philosophical Review*, 1960.

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume, 1936.

All	}	tame tiger(s) growl(s)
Most		
Many		
Some		
A few		
No		
At least one	}	

are all perfectly in order. But if we replace in each sentence the word 'growl' (or, in the case of the last, the word 'growls') with the word 'exist' (or 'exists'), we obtain a curious result. All the resulting sentences *except the first two* seem perfectly, or at least reasonably, natural; the first two, on the other hand, sound extremely odd. And this result is connected with the result of another test in which 'all' and 'most' seem to behave differently from the other quantifying adjectives (as we may call them) in our list. The following sentences all seem straight-forwardly satisfactory and natural, viz.:

There are	{	many	}	tame tigers
		some		
		a few		
		no		
There is at least one tame tiger				

whereas the sentences

There are all tame tigers  
 There are most tame tigers

don't seem to make sense *in this series* at all. To make any sense of them, it seems that we should have to interpret 'There are' in a quite different sense from that which it can comfortably bear in the longer list; we should have to construe 'There' as a real demonstrative adverb of place and not as simply an integral part of the construction 'There are/is'.

The explanation of these facts seems to be somewhat as follows. Suppose the existence of tame tigers to be something which the parties to a speech situation know or believe or are prepared to assume to be the case; minimally, something which a speaker believes, and assumes his audience to be prepared to assume. Then the question may be raised, to what extent and in what proportion tame tigers, say, share the habits of ordinary tigers. Do they, for example, growl? The answer may be that they all do; or that some of them do; or that a few of them do —and so on. The sentences I first listed could all serve as answers to that question. Even if they are not actually serving as answers to such a question, they call for a similar background of belief or assumption. There is here a (weakened and partial) parallel to the use of singular expressions with the function of identifying references. We may express it by saying that the sentences in question are most naturally taken as asserting, *with regard to the members of a class the existence of members of which is presupposed*, that all, most, some or a few etc. of them exhibit a certain characteristic. Let us speak, for short, of *a class the existence of members of which is presupposed as a presupposed class*. Then the quantifying adjectives, as used in my first list of sentences, indicate, though in some cases very roughly indeed, how far the speaker is prepared to go in ascribing a certain characteristic to the members of a presupposed class.

In the existential sentences, on the other hand, the quantifying adjectives, where they work at all, work differently. There is a difference between indicating (roughly) how big a slice of the membership of a presupposed class one is prepared to affirm to possess a certain characteristic and indicating (roughly) how big one is prepared to affirm the membership of a non-presupposed class to be. And in this difference lies the reason why some of the quantifying adjectives can be used for both jobs and some only for one.

The difference might be illustrated graphically. (1) Represent a presupposed class by an already drawn circle;

and then represent the ascribing of a property to some part of its membership by the shading of some part of its area. We may suppose the instructions for *this* use of the quantifying adjectives to go somewhat as follows. (The vagueness of some of the instructions reproduces the vagueness of the words.)

For 'no'	—	leave the circle unshaded
— 'at least one'	—	draw one short stroke
— 'a few'	—	a few short strokes in a small area
— 'some'	—	shade a rather larger area
— 'many'	—	a sizeable area
— 'most'	—	more than half the total area
— 'all'	—	the whole area.

(2) For the existential case, on the other hand, there is no circle already drawn. Instead we are to draw one (or to refrain from drawing one!) We find we can issue (usually vague) instructions for some of the quantifying adjectives in *this* use; but not for others. Thus we could say:

For 'no'	—	refrain from drawing a circle
— 'at least one'	—	draw as small a circle as you can
— 'a few'	—	a circle a few times the area of the smallest you can
— 'some'	—	a somewhat larger circle
— 'many'	—	a quite sizeable circle.

But there is no way at all of continuing this series which would give us a representation of 'most' and 'all'. For them we must have, whereas for the others we don't seem to need, an already drawn circle.

This method of graphic representation has, of course, no particular importance in itself. It is only *one* method of bringing out (even perhaps slightly exaggerating) the difference between the two jobs which the quantifying adjectives

tives perform in the two types of case, so that we can see clearly that, and why, all of them can perform one of these jobs while only some of them can perform the other. But seeing this helps us to see something more. It helps us to see how the oddity or non-oddity of the sentences embodying the quantifying adjectives is connected with the doctrine that existence is not a predicate; or, more exactly, with the doctrine (1) that the verb-form 'exists' (or 'exist'), while it cannot be denied to be a predicate in the sense of grammar, nevertheless is not, or does not signify, a predicate in a logical or functional sense of the word, and (2) that the grammatical subjects of this verb are not true logical subjects. Moore never really stated *what* the connection between the example-sentences and this doctrine was. But if the essence of predication is the ascribing of something to an individual, or to some, none or all of a class, where the existence of the individual or of members of the class is presupposed (or has been *antecedently* affirmed or implied), *then* we can see the connection. The doctrine seems to follow at once and the example-sentences serve simply to cast, we might say, Moore light upon it. From them, and our explanation of them together, we can extract a test, understanding its rationale. The test will go like this. Given a grammatical subject and predicate, then it is a necessary condition of their counting as a *logical* subject and predicate respectively that if the grammatical subject admits of starting off with *any* of the quantifying adjectives, then it should admit of starting off with them all (with, where necessary, i. e. where 'at least one' is involved, a change from singular to plural or vice versa.)

So far we have a neat and tidy theory. Let us see if we can upset it. Consider the following example. I enter a room in which a discussion is going on. I hear what sound like ordinary personal names being freely used and person-predicates used in connexion with them. I quickly come to the conclusion that the discussion is primarily about fictional characters. I hear the names Anna and Pierre and



Emma and Julien Sorel and recognize the characteristics and incidents alluded to as belonging to the appropriate stories. Also, the speakers occasionally refer to themselves. One says she wouldn't have none what Anna did in her situation, though her husband would have done what (say) Pierre did in his. However, a lot of other names occur which I can't, as it seems to me, *place* in their appropriate stories. Tolstoy's Anna is being compared with an Ann, and Tolstoy's Pierre with a Peter, whom I can't identify. At this point I intervene and say: "I know who Anna and Pierre, Emma and Julien are, but what stories do these other characters come in?" And to this I receive the unexpected reply: "They don't come in any stories. *Most* of the people (characters) we're talking about actually *exist*."

Another example. A child asks to look at a book, actually the Classical Dictionary, and I hand it to him, saying: "A good proportion of the characters listed are mythical, of course; but *most* of them *existed*." (Or conversely.)

What are we to say about the proposed test in the light of these examples? Are we to say that the examples simply show that the proposed test gives only a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition of our having genuine subjects and predicates? We might; but why should we? Why shouldn't we say that what the examples do is simply to draw attention to certain cases in which the verb *is* is used as a predicate? Somebody might object: "This won't do at all. The appeal of the test lay in the fact that it made a certain sort of sense. The *point* of it was that where the quantifying adjectives 'most' and 'all' could be comfortably employed, they were typically employed in a certain way, i.e. in a way, which presupposed the existence of members of the subject-class. The whole point was, wasn't it, that you had a genuine subject and predicate just in the case where existence was presupposed. But no case where existence is explicitly *asserted* is a case where existence is *presupposed*. Yet your example-cases are cases where existence is explicitly asserted. So you can't simply admit a predicative use of 'exist'

in these cases without implicitly giving up the rationale of the test."

The reply to this objection is that it is confused. We can still retain the principle that where the quantifying adjectives are used in the way in which 'most', unlike 'some', is always used, the subject-class is a presupposed class. Only we have to pause to consider what this class is. In the example under consideration it is the class of *characters being talked about*. And the peculiarity of such a class is that it may be, and in the case under consideration actually is, radically heterogeneous; even, if you will permit the expression, ontologically or metaphysically heterogeneous. In using 'exist' here we really are saying that most of the members of this heterogeneous class belong to one of its subclasses as opposed to another. Why shouldn't we say, then, that 'exists' really does work as a predicate here; and that so also would, in such a context, 'fictional', 'legendary', 'mythical', 'imaginary', 'made-up' on the one hand — and 'real' or 'historical' on the other?

Now if we can work this trick for some sentences whose subjects admit quantifying adjectives, can we also work it for sentences whose subjects are definite singular terms? I think perhaps we sometimes can. We can't work it in quite the same way, of course, making our point *via* the quantifying adjectives. But we can work it on the same underlying principle. King Alfred did exist, King Arthur did not. We have only to see the names as serving to identify, within the *heterogeneous* class of kingly characters we talk about — a class which comprises both actual and legendary kings — a particular member of that class in each case; and then see the predicate as serving to assign that particular member to the appropriate subclass. Thus 'exists' appears as a predicate and not as a predicate of a concept; but as a predicate of some, and not of others, members of the heterogeneous class. What, on this model, we shall have to regard as presupposed by the use of the name in each case is not the existence in history of an actual king with certain actual

characteristics, or the existence in legend of a legendary king with certain legendary characteristics, but rather the existence-in-history-or-legend of an actual-or-legendary king with certain actual-or-legendary characteristics.

But now, we might ask, have we anything other than a case of theory elaborating itself in the void, out of touch with the facts? Is there any reason for saying, in any actual case of the use of definite singular terms with 'exists' or 'doesn't exist', that *this* model supplies the right way of looking at what is said, as opposed to one of the other models I mentioned? Well, at least one might be more inclined to say this in some cases than in others: cases, for instance, where the singular term comes up in contexts like those provided by my two examples. Or, in the case of a child, his head filled with names and stories, who asks: Did King Alfred exist? Did King Arthur? Did Jesus? Does God?, we might think both of his questions and (if we are sympathetic) of our answers in this way. No doubt there are occasions enough when the model doesn't fit at all. But we might also consider whether we are obliged to *oppose* the models (theoretical accounts) to each other in every case. Must we suppose that at least and at most one model will fit each case? I am inclined to think that we take our models too seriously, if we suppose this, and have too little regard for the pleasant fluidities of thinking.

## RESUMEN

En este artículo se discute, en relación a dos clases de usos de oraciones, la doctrina de que la existencia no es un predicado.

Primero se consideran oraciones que contienen nombres singulares, de personajes de ficción o míticos tal como aparecen cuando se narra un cuento o un mito. En cuanto a las oraciones que se refieren a individuos históricos identificándolos definitivamente, se asumirá que la existencia de los individuos referidos se presupone en lugar de estar afirmada implícitamente.

Es claro que cuando los nombres de personajes de ficción o míticos se usan para narrar un cuento o un mito, no se refieren a individuos históricos a los que identifican correctamente. Pero los predicados que acompañan a esos nombres pueden ser del mismo tipo de los que se encuentran en enunciados verdaderos o falsos que se refieren a hombres reales. Las oraciones que contienen nombres de personajes de ficción o míticos en una época se analizaron como informaciones verdaderas o falsas de lo que se encuentra en determinados libros. Aparte del hecho de que este análisis no se aplica a las oraciones en que los nombres aparecen por primera vez, el programa no es realista. Tampoco lo es la versión que las considera a todas falsas en razón de que implícitamente afirman existencia. No es realista porque los usos de las oraciones son diferentes a aquellos en los que se enuncian hechos empíricos. Lo que ocurre es que las formas lingüísticas de esos usos están tomadas de aquellas en las que se enuncian hechos y las funciones de éstas están, por así decirlo, reproducidas en los usos en los que se narra un cuento: por ejemplo, el referirse identificando, aunque, claro está, la referencia es a personajes del cuento; las presuposiciones existenciales están gobernadas por la rúbrica implícita —“en el cuento”. No deben, pues, confundirse los usos, y no hay razón para negar que los usos del lenguaje en los que se narra un cuento no tengan su forma propia de referirse identificando.

Sin embargo, al decir ‘Don Quijote es un personaje de ficción’, no usamos ‘Don Quijote’ como en una *ficción* para referirnos a un personaje de ficción; el que Don Quijote sea un personaje en una historia no es parte de la historia de Don Quijote. Éste es un ejemplo de un conjunto de casos que no parecen poder tratarse en la forma sugerida. De este conjunto, los lógicos han tomado las frases ‘no existió’, ‘no existe’ y ‘existe’, ‘existió’: el Rey Alfredo existió, el Rey Arturo no existió, Bucéfalo existe, Pegaso no existe. Así como de las

formas negativas no puede decirse que los nombres están usados como *en una ficción* para referirse a personajes de ficción, de las afirmativas tampoco puede decirse que los nombres están usados como cuando se refieren a hombres o a caballos. En una ficción, la referencia presupone existencia ficticia; en un discurso fáctico la referencia presupone existencia fáctica. Cuando lo que sigue al nombre, como en los ejemplos, es una afirmación o negación de existencia fáctica, el nombre no se ajusta a ninguna de las dos funciones. Luego: *relativamente a una de esas dos funciones del nombre*, no podemos interpretar 'existe' como un predicado.

Existen dos modelos clásicos para interpretar esas oraciones. El modelo para 'El Rey Arturo nunca existió' está dado por una oración como "No existe ningún Rey de Bretaña que siquiera vagamente responda a las descripciones asociadas con el nombre 'Arturo' en la leyenda arturiana". El segundo modelo está dado por: "El concepto 'Rey Arturo' no está ejemplificado". ¿Debemos aceptarlos? A continuación se tratará de ver si podemos encontrar otro modelo que preserve el papel predicativo de 'existe' *sin* que el sujeto se convierta en un término singular que se refiere a un concepto. Las oraciones,

Todos los La mayoría de los Muchos Algunos Unos cuantos Ningún Cuando menos un	}	tigre(s) manso(s) gruñe(n)
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son correctas. Pero si se reemplaza existe(n) por gruñe(n), el resultado es curioso. Todas, *salvo las dos primeras*, parecen correctas. Lo cual está relacionado con otra prueba:

(No) Existe(n)	{	muchos algunos unos cuantos ningún	}	tigre(s) manso(s)
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parecen naturales. Mientras que

Existen todos los tigres mansos  
 Existen la mayoría de tigres mansos

no tienen sentido. La explicación parece ser la siguiente: las oracio-

nes de la primera lista se toman como afirmando, *con respecto a los miembros de una clase, la existencia de cuyos miembros se presupone*, que todos, la mayoría, algunos, etc., *de ellos* exhiben una cierta característica. Una clase semejante es una *clase presupuesta*. Los adjetivos cuantificadores indican, entonces, hasta dónde se está dispuesto a llegar en la adscripción de ciertas características a los miembros de una clase presupuesta. En las oraciones existenciales los adjetivos funcionan en forma diferente: hay una diferencia entre indicar cuál es la parte de los miembros de una clase presupuesta que se está dispuesto a afirmar que poseen una cierta característica e indicar cuál es la cantidad de miembros que se está dispuesto a afirmar que tiene una clase no-presupuesta. A continuación dicha diferencia se ilustra gráficamente, lo cual hace ver cómo la rareza o no-rareza de las oraciones con adjetivos cuantificadores está conectada con la doctrina (1) de que la forma verbal 'existe' (o 'existen'), aun cuando es un predicado gramatical, no lo es en un sentido lógico y (2) de que los sujetos gramaticales de este verbo no son verdaderos sujetos lógicos. De lo cual es posible extraer el siguiente criterio: dados un sujeto y un predicado gramaticales, para que sean sujeto y predicados *lógicos* es condición necesaria que si el sujeto gramatical admite *cualquiera* de los adjetivos cuantificadores, entonces debe admitirlos todos.

Se examinan luego algunos contraejemplos. Uno de ellos es el siguiente: alguien entra en un cuarto en el que se discute. Oye mencionar diversos nombres y predicados relacionados con ellos: algunos son de personajes de ficción y los reconoce como tales, otros, en cambio, no los identifica. Al preguntar dónde aparecen, recibe la respuesta siguiente: 'No aparecen en ninguna parte. La *mayoría* de la gente de la que hablamos *existe* en la realidad'. En este ejemplo la clase presupuesta es la de la *gente acerca de la cual se habla*: y una clase semejante es ontológicamente heterogénea. Al usar 'existen', estamos diciendo que la mayoría de los miembros de esta clase heterogénea pertenecen a una de sus subclases. ¿Por qué no decir, que 'existe' es aquí un auténtico predicado y que también lo sería en un contexto de ficción, legendario, mítico, imaginario, inventado, por un lado, y en uno real, histórico, por otro lado?

Se intenta, luego, aplicar lo anterior a oraciones cuyos sujetos son términos singulares definidos: el Rey Alfredo existió, el Rey Arturo no existió. En estos casos hay que ver a los nombres como identificando, dentro de la clase heterogénea de los monarcas acerca de los cuales hablamos —clase que incluye a los reyes legendarios y a los existentes—, un miembro particular en cada caso: y al predicado como sirviendo para asignarle a ese nombre la subclase apropiada. Así, 'existe' aparece como predicado y no como un

predicado de un concepto; pero como el predicado de algunos miembros de la clase heterogénea y no de otros. Según este modelo, lo que debe verse como presupuesto por el uso del nombre no es la existencia histórica de un verdadero rey con ciertas características o la existencia en la leyenda de un rey legendario con ciertas características legendarias, sino la existencia-en-la-historia-o-en-la-leyenda de un rey verdadero o legendario con ciertas características verdaderas-o-legendarias.

Pero ¿hay alguna razón para decir que, frente a los otros, este modelo es mejor? En algunos casos tal vez sí, aun cuando sin duda hay situaciones en que el modelo no se aplica. Pero también debemos considerar si en cada caso estamos obligados a oponer los modelos entre sí. Quizá los tomamos con demasiada seriedad y no le prestamos mucha atención a la agradable fluidez del pensar.