

DISCUSIONES

WHAT IS IT, "TO EXIST"?

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Mr. P. F. Strawson's ingeniously critical discussion of the question whether existence is never a predicate, which appeared in Vol. I, No. 1 of *Critica*, reminded me of two papers of mine published very long ago, that have implications relevant to that question. The earlier and briefer of the two papers was "On our Knowledge of Existents", which appeared on pp. 163-67 of the Proceedings of the *Seventh International Congress of Philosophy* held at Oxford University in September 1930. The later paper was "Propositions, Opinions, Sentences, and Facts." It undertakes to define with precision and in a non-arbitrary manner not only the terms its title mentions, but also "Judgement" and a number of related others; and it appeared in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 26, Dec. 19, 1940.

These two papers seem to me to make evident that in some assertions existence is predicate, and that in some others it is subject. Obviously, however, the question crucial as regards the validity of this contention then is what exactly makes one constituent of an assertion its predicate, and another constituent of it its subject.

The answer I would offer was stated in Section 9, "Subject and Predicate", of the second of those two papers of mine. It is that in any empirical epistemic attempt, i.e., in any attempt to discover empirically the answer to a question, we have both a *datum* — which the question *is about* but which at the time is not itself in doubt; and a *dubitatum* — which the question *is as to*, i.e., which is what we do not yet know about the *datum* but plan to discover by empirical scrutiny of it.

Take for example the assertion "Napoleon was short." It may have been made as answer to a question about Napoleon's stature — in which case "Napoleon" was the *datum*, was existential, and was the assertion's *subject*; and "short" was the empirically obtained *reperitum*, was quiddative, and was *predicate*. But that same

assertion might instead have been made as answer to a different question; namely, whether an Emperor of short stature ever existed — in which case “being an Emperor of short stature” was the *datum*, was quiddative, and was the assertions’s *subject*; and “the Emperor Napoleon” was the empirically discovered *repertum*, was existential, and was *predicate*.

Thus, the question as to which constituent of an assertion is subject and which other constituent of it is predicate cannot be answered by examination of the assertion itself; but *only by inquiry as to what the question was*, to which the assertion was offered as answer. The *datum* of that question is, *eo ipso*, *subject* in the assertion made as answer to it; and the empirically obtained *repertum*, which eventually replaces the *dubitatum* of that question, is predicate in the assertion made as answer to the question.

An interesting other illustration would be the relational assertion “John loves Mary.” If it is made in answer to the question “Whom does John love?”, then “Mary” is the predicate. But if the question was “How does John feel toward Mary?”, then “loves” is the predicate; and if the question was “Does the relation ‘loves’ exist anywhere?”, then “From John to Mary” is the predicate.

In the light of the perspective provided by the remarks that have preceded, let us now turn directly to this paper’s title question: “What is it, ‘to exist’?”.

In the earlier of my two papers, I stated that the best way to discover the meaning of our assertions of existence is to observe the manner in which we naturally go about demonstrating the truth of one of them; for instance, of the assertion that *black swans exist*, or, synonymously, that *there are black swans*.

If someone were to doubt or deny it, what we would of course do would be to take him to some zoological garden where we would eventually find ourselves in position to point to a place in space and to say to him: “Look, *here now* is a black swan.” Thus, indicating a place in space where at the time are observable the characters that jointly constitute the quiddity meant by “black swan” is the only proof we ultimately can give — but which is wholly conclusive — that the black swans physically exist.

The very synonymity, however, of the two generic assertions “X’s exist”, and “There are X’s”, suggest that only when *physical* existence is specifically meant does the order-system in which a place is indicated need to be the space-time order-system. If, for

example, the assertion were made that *a square root of 4 exists*, (or synonymously, that *there is a square root of 4*,) *but no square root of 2*, then the order-system in view would of course be that of *the rational numbers* — the integers. In the order-system of the *irrational numbers*, on the other hand, there is a square root of 2; namely, 1.4142 . . .

It should be noted that assertions of existence (whether physical, mathematical, or other) are either wholly determinate, e.g., "Here now is a black swan", or are indeterminate in various degrees; e.g., "Black swans exist, somewhere"; or, less indeterminately, "... in Australia"; or, still less indeterminately, "in this zoological garden."

Anyway, the basic existential question is of the form: "At which place or places in order-system O is quiddity Q present?" And the basic existential assertion, which answers that question, is "Quiddity Q is present at (i.e., occupies, exists at,) place or places P in order-system O."

Moreover, that question and the assertion answering it are the exact converses respectively of the basic quiddative question "What quiddity is present at (i.e., occupies, exists at) place P in order-system O?", and of the basic quiddative assertion "At place P in order-system O the quiddity present is quiddity Q."