

Chapter Two

Is Existence a First-Level Property?

We begin our critical discussions with an examination of what might be called the naive property theory of existence. This theory consists of two related claims: (i) existence is a property; and (ii) the existing of an individual consists in its instantiating of the property, existence. The first claim implies that existence is a first-level property, a property of individuals, without excluding the possibility that it is also a property of non-individuals, e.g., properties. The second claim specifies how an existing individual exists or has existence: it has it by instantiating it. As we use 'property' and 'instantiation,' they are interdefinable: every property is an instantiable entity and every instantiable entity is a property. *P* is a property if and only if *P* is *possibly* such that it is instantiated *by* something, where 'possibly' is to be taken to express metaphysical or 'broadly logical' possibility. This definition rules *out* such impossible properties as being both round and square, and does so reasonably: it is difficult to understand how something that nothing could instantiate could count as a property. It rules *in* uninstantiated properties, again reasonably: whether or not all properties must be instantiated in order to exist is a difficult question not to be settled by a mere definition.

Property-instances are definable in terms of inherence: *Q* is a property-instance if and only if *Q* *actually* inheres *in* something. Now if this is what we mean by 'property,' and 'property-instance,' then a strong case can be made that existence can be neither a property nor a property-instance of individuals. If so, the existing of an individual can neither be identified with its instantiating of existence, nor with the inherence in it of existence. This chapter aims to make this case.

Some will think that this is a dead issue, one that was definitively settled some time ago by Frege and Russell, if not two centuries ago by Kant. Did not Kant's critique of the ontological argument establish, once and for all, that existence is not a first-level property? Recently, however, numerous philosophers have been urging, in an apparent break with Kantian-Fregean orthodoxy, that existence is after all a property of individuals. Alvin Plantinga, for example, maintains that 'Socrates exists' can be used to express "a singular proposition predicating of Socrates the property of existence."¹ According to David Kaplan, Russell's "claim that it is meaningless to predicate existence of [the referent of] a logically proper name is plainly a mistake."² And Nathan Salmon assures us "that there is a special property -- the property of existing -- that an individual has only by virtue of the fact that it exists."³ According to Salmon, philosophers who deny this -- he mentions Kant, Frege and Russell by

name -- are “completely mistaken.”⁴ We shall see that this last epithet is more justly applied to the view of Salmon and Co. Thus the issue whether existence is a property of individuals is far from dead. We should, however, be alert to the possibility that what Frege *et al.* were denying when they denied that existence is a first-level property is distinct from what Salmon *et al.* are affirming when they affirm that it is.

The plan of this chapter is to present various arguments for the thesis that existence cannot be a property, and thus for the thesis that the existing of an individual cannot consist in its instantiating of existence. Along the way it will be shown that existence can be neither a property-instance nor a trope, which is roughly a property-instance capable of independent existence. But why present several arguments for a thesis, if one will do the job? The answer to this is that in philosophy it is never wholly clear whether a given argument is successful. Thus it is appropriate to consider a variety of arguments for the same conclusion. It is hoped that the various arguments will illuminate one another and their common subject-matter and that their cumulative persuasive force will be greater than that of any single argument.

1. THERE ARE NO NONEXISTENT OBJECTS

The following arguments against the naive property theory of existence rest on the reasonable assumption that there are no nonexistent objects, that every object exists. For if there are nonexistent objects, as philosophers in the tradition of Alexius Meinong maintain, then one may plausibly hold that it is possession of the first-level property of existence that distinguishes existing things (Britain, the highest mountain) from nonexistent things (Atlantis, the golden mountain).⁵ Thus a bit of preliminary argument is required to shore up what we are calling a reasonable assumption. That is the task of this section.

A philosopher who maintains that there are objects that do not exist is of course not maintaining the contradiction that there *exist* objects that do not exist. What then is he maintaining? There are two possibilities. Either the view is that nonexistent items have no being whatsoever, or the view is that they have a mode of being weaker than existence. Both views have been held and both involve difficulties.

For Meinong, such items as the golden mountain are *ausserseiend*, literally, “outside of being.”⁶ Meinong speaks of the *Aussersein* of the “pure object.” What he means is that the pure object neither exists (in the manner of causally active/passive things like electrons and mountains) nor subsists (in the manner of such causally inert items as propositions and numbers). The pure object has no being at all, whence it follows that *Aussersein* is not a third mode of being alongside of existence and subsistence. It is a commonly made mistake to attribute to Meinong the view of the early Russell that the golden mountain and the like have being or subsistence.⁷

Nevertheless, the “pure object,” the golden mountain, for example, is not a mere object of thought; for it *is* whether or not anyone thinks about it or refers to it. The realm of *Aussersein*, then, is a realm of mind-independent items. They are all out there waiting to be investigated in the Theory of Objects, and it is only the famous “prejudice in favor of the actual” that dissuades us from prosecuting the investigation.

But how can something be both mind-independent and beingless? As Meinong says, nonexistent items are *given* to thought; they are not excogitated. We don’t think them up, we somehow apprehend them. They may or may not acquire what he calls the “pseudo-existence” of being actually thought about by some mind. The problem is not how one can hold before one’s mind a pure essence in abstraction from existence, for nonexistent items are not engendered by abstraction. The problem is how a pure essence can both mind-independently *be* and yet be beingless. How can the golden mountain, the round square, Pegasus, Cerberus and other *possibilia* and *impossibilia* *be* independent of anyone’s thinking and yet *be* beingless?

Now it seems to me that this is a flat-out contradiction. For if I say that the golden mountain *is* but lacks being, then what I am saying is that it both is and is not. We are forced to make a choice. If we say that the golden mountain is mind-independent, then we must say that it has some sort of being. But if we deny that it has any sort of being, then we must deny that it is mind-independent. Meinong himself seems to realize that he cannot have it both ways. Consider a passage from the late work *On Emotional Presentation* (1917) in which he inclines toward the view that *Aussersein* is a third mode of being:

As is well known, there ‘are’ many objects that do not exist, and many which do not even subsist. But because they ‘are’ anyway, though they cannot be said to be in a sense which warrants applying the traditional word ‘being’ to them, I believed, and still believe, that I am justified in attributing to them something being-like (*seinsartiges*) by predicating ‘extra-being,’ or *Aussersein*, of them.⁸

The same contradiction may be approached by a different route. Meinong, and such latter-day Meinongians as Richard Routley want to say that

a. There are nonexistent items that have no being at all.

and

b. All nonexistent items are actual items.

But (a) and (b) are inconsistent. To see this we must see why (b) is true. All agree that the golden mountain is merely possible whereas the round square is impossible. But ‘merely possible’ and ‘impossible’ do not characterize these objects in themselves, but in their relation to existence. One is merely possibly existent, the other is impossibly existent. The golden mountain itself is an actual, albeit incomplete, item that is actually golden and actually a mountain. Roderick Chisholm puts it this way:



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