

Chapter One

The Idea of a Paradigm Theory of Existence

Our question about the nature of existence is actually two questions. First, what is it for a contingent individual to exist? Second, what is existence itself? But the questions are closely intertwined, and so may be posed indifferently in the form, what is existence? Our treatment divides into two halves, one critical, the other constructive. The critical chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 of this book tread the *via negativa*: they attempt to show what existence is not. They issue in the following aporetic tetrad:

- a. Existence is not a property or property-instance of individuals.
- b. Existence is not identical to individuals.
- c. Existence is not a property of properties or cognate items.
- d. Existence is not a property of worlds or domains.

The limbs of this tetrad are plausible even without argument; the detailed arguments of chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 should make them well-nigh irresistible. Taken together, (a)-(d) present us with the two main problems of this book. The first is to explain how existence can belong to existing individuals (as the third and fourth limbs imply) without being identical to individuals (as per the second limb), but also without being a property or property-instance of them (as per the first limb).

To simplify the question, how can an individual have existence if this having is not the instantiating of a property? Chapter 6 answers this question with the doctrine that the existence of a contingent individual is the contingent unity or togetherness of its ontological constituents. We will see that this togetherness cannot be understood as a property of an individual or as a relation among its constituents. It is a unique sort of unity the nature of which logically requires a unifier as its ontological ground, a unifier that is external in that it is distinct from the individual and each of its constituents.

The second main problem is to determine what existence itself is. As the reflexive pronoun suggests, existence *itself* is existence considered in its difference from existing individuals. There is clearly a *prima facie* distinction between existence itself and the existence of an individual. Thus someone who thinks that existence is a universal property of individuals would have to distinguish between the property of existence itself -- which is a universal -- and the particular existing of *a*, which is *a*'s instantiating of existence, the particular existing of *b*, which is *b*'s instantiating of existence, and so on. Now we shall see in Chapter 2 that existence itself cannot be a property, and thus that the existing of an individual cannot be its instantiating of this putative property. But

although this illustration of the *prima facie* distinction collapses, the distinction does not. Given (from Chapter 6) that the existence of an individual is the unity of its ontological constituents, we will argue (Chapter 7) that unity logically demands an external unifier, and thus that existence itself – existence in its difference from individual existents – is the external unifier of each particular unity of ontological constituents.

Our approach implies not only that existence itself exists, but also that it exists in a paradigmatic way, as that by relation to which contingent objects exist. Hence the name, ‘paradigm theory of existence.’ To deny that existence itself exists is to embrace difficulties whose exfoliation will commence in section 2 below. To deny that existence paradigmatically exists is to make an adequate account of existence impossible, as section 1 below begins to argue. The gist of the paradigm theory may be put as follows:

(PT) Necessarily, for any contingent individual x , x exists if and only if (i) there is a necessary y such that y is the paradigm existent, and (ii) y , as the external unifier of x ’s ontological constituents, directly produces the unity/existence of x .

(PT) comes highly recommended by the fact that it allows for the reconciliation of two desiderata that cannot otherwise be reconciled. One desideratum is that a theory of existence account for the *actual existence* of existing individuals. The other is that it avoid circularity. These desiderata and their reconciliation will be explained in detail in the following section.

Another point in favor of (PT) is that, in accounting for *what it is* for a contingent individual to exist, it at the same time accounts for *why* any contingent individual exists. No doubt some will take this to be a liability of (PT). But it is a peculiarity of existence that no adequate account of it can be given which is not a unified account both of *what it is* for a contingent individual to exist, and of *why* any contingent individual exists. We will return to this in detail in sections 5 and 6 below.

1. BETWEEN EXISTENTIAL NEUTRALITY AND CIRCULARITY

The very question, ‘What is existence?’ embodies a tension. The word ‘what’ suggests that the goal of the inquiry is the nature, essence, or intelligible structure of the existence of individuals. But the word ‘existence,’ if it means anything, refers to the *that* and the *whether* of things. The existence of a thing is its sheer ontological presence, a presence that makes possible, and thus is not to be confused with, its phenomenological presence, *pace* some phenomenologists. The existence of a thing is its being as opposed to its (possible) nonbeing, its being ‘outside the mind.’ The existence of a thing is

something it has quite apart from us and our conceptual and linguistic activities. This 'datanic' point must be kept in view. Although we take this to be a datum, section 2 argues for it by arguing that existence cannot be a concept that we impose on things, but must be a determination they possess independently of us.

Now if the existence of a thing is its sheer ontological presence, its *thatness*, then to ask what it is for an individual to exist, is to ask, seemingly paradoxically, about the *whatness* (nature) of this *thatness*. This is not empty word-play. If the sheer existence of things is not to be an unintelligible surd like Jean-Paul Sartre's *en soi*, the appropriate response to which would be Roquentin's nausea, then the existence of things must have an intelligible structure. The *thatness* must have a *whatness*. But what sort of intelligible content or structure could existence have? Is not existence just a bare facticity opposite to all intelligibility? If ontology is fundamentally about existence, and not fundamentally about what exists, how is ontology so much as possible? This is a problem we must solve if we are to proceed.

The problem assumes the form of a dilemma. If a *theory* of the existence of individuals is to be possible, then existence must have an intelligible structure that can be explicated or conceptualized. But any noncircular explication which presupposes that existence is a property of existents will fail to capture actual existence. Thus even if it is true that, necessarily, for any x , x exists if and only if x is causally active/passive, this explication fails to capture actual existence. This is clear from the fact that the truth of the biconditional is consistent with the nonexistence of individuals. Even if no individual exists, it could still be true that, for any x , x exists just in case x is causally active/passive. To specify a property that all and only existing individuals have, such as the property of being causally active/passive, or the property of being spatiotemporal, or the property of being self-identical, or the property of being the value of a bound variable, etc., is not to express what it is for an individual to exist.

Let us say that any theory of existence which attempts to specify a property that all and only existing individuals have is an *existentially neutral* theory of existence. It is clear that any such theory is not a theory of *existence* at all, but at best a theory of *what exists*. Thus the first example in the foregoing paragraph tells us that *what exists* are causally active/passive entities and nothing besides. It does not tell us what it is for an entity to exist. Thus our first desideratum for a viable theory of existence is that it avoid existential neutrality. To avoid existential neutrality, however, a theory of existence must somehow invoke or presuppose that something actually exists. For only if the theory invokes or presupposes something that actually exists will it be able to account for the actual existence of anything. But then how can the theory avoid vicious circularity? How can a viable theory satisfy the first desideratum, which



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