

# Existence<sup>1</sup>

A.N. Prior

I have decided not to argue here about whether existence is a predicate or not. Of course it is. But what is the relationship to other predicates? Does 'X is Y' always entail 'X is'?

Aristotle on this point – [gives] 2 views, in Cat., and in De Int. and Top. Obviously 2 sorts of predicate, ones that imply existence and ones that don't.

Coming to Russell: [he] distinguishes not only 2 sorts of predicate, but 2 sorts of subject, I mean 2 sorts of simpler subject – logical proper names, and definite descriptions. Re definite descriptions: simple predicates imply existence, complex ones are ambiguous.

{2}

'The X is a {possible/alleged/former/non} Y' [is] differentiable from 'It is {possible/alleged/now a thing of the past/not [the case]} that the X is a Y.'

With logical proper names the case is different. These mean by identifying; if they fail to identify an object, no sentence. So 'This exists' is a true sentence, if it is a sentence at all and 'This doesn't exist' a false sentence if it is a sentence at all. (That's not how Russell puts it, but Moore; Russell says 'This exists' is meaningless, but I think Moore here has a better proof of what Russell's position implies than Russell himself has). And there's no difference between 'This is a {...} Y' and 'It is {...} that this is a Y'. If sentences at all, and this has some reference, they have some truth-value.

Other complications here, though. Moore's reasons for saying 'This exists' and 'This doesn't exist' are meaningful. 'This might not have {3} existed' is sometimes true, and sometimes shown as facts<sup>2</sup>. But how does it?

It is possible that this doesn't exist.

i.e. the non-existence of this is a possible state of affairs. But is it? - Cf. 'Once this didn't exist', which you might equate<sup>3</sup> with.

It was the case that (this doesn't exist) ('This doesn't exist' was once true). But when was it? Does this mean that variation exists, exists necessarily and permanently?

Similar to a trick of Ramsey's. Ramsey held that assertions about the number of objects in the universe are all either tautologies<sup>4</sup> or contradictions. Proof:- Propositions about identity and otherwise are all necessary propositions. So this, say, is necessary:-

{a ≠ b, a ≠ c, b ≠ c}

and this necessarily implies 'There are at least 3 individuals'; and what is necessarily implied by a necessary truth is a necessary truth; ∴ it is a necessary truth that there are at least 3 individuals.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This MS is kept in the Prior collection at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. It has been edited by Martin Prior and Peter Øhrstrøm. It has not dated, but it is written on note paper of the Department of Philosophy, University of Manchester, and only shows Professor Dorothy Emmett as head of department, suggesting that the notes were written soon after A.N. Prior came to Manchester in 1959. It seems that it forms notes for a lecture.

<sup>2</sup> The text is uncertain. The subsequent question "But how does it?" presumably refers to the uncertain text.

<sup>3</sup> The text is uncertain.

<sup>4</sup> The text might read 'tautologous'.

My own solution is to distinguish between ‘necessarily’ and ‘not possibly not’; and in time, between ‘has always been true’ and ‘has never been false’.

{4} (Deal [with] in detail)

If we have no logical proper names, these complications can be dropped. But then we go back to the other complications.

The X is a {non/alleged/possible/former} Y.

must be distinguished from

It is {not the case/alleged/possible/over} that the X is a Y.

Moreover, [we] can’t always define a short form as the long form + ‘The X exists’,

e.g.

(a) The X is a possible-non-exister.  
(might not have existed)

≠

(b) The X does exist, but it might have been that ‘the X doesn’t exist’.

Not more ∴ this last is nonsense but ∴ it doesn’t mean the same thing. ‘The X doesn’t exist’ means ‘there is no unique X’ and this doesn’t ... etc<sup>6</sup>. And existence isn’t the only case where there are these differences, though it’s a striking case.

Walther’s house might have had wings.

≠

Walther’s house exists (i.e. Walther has a house) and it might have been that Walther’s house has wings.

{5}

Summing up, admitting existence as a predicate complicates logic, one way or another, but the complications aren’t unmanageable, and least some of them would be forced on us even if we didn’t list existence as a predicate.

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<sup>5</sup> Prior is using ∴ for ‘therefore’ and ∴ for ‘because’. This usage is common in both New Zealand and Britain, especially the former in geometric proofs.

<sup>6</sup> The text is uncertain, but looks like ‘&c’, where the first symbol is consistent with Prior’s usual representation of the ampersand.