

## EXISTENCE AND PREDICATION: SOME OBSERVATIONS

DIPANKAR BARMAN

### I

The problem concerning the predication of existence has been a controversial issue in the philosophy of language and logic. The trace of this problem, of course, is found in Plato's *Theatetus*, where he remarked on the first elements that "[e]ach of them just by itself can only be named; we cannot attribute to it anything further or say that it exists or does not exist..." (Cornford, 1935, 201E-202, p. 143). Notwithstanding, the problem came in light duly from Descartes' Ontological Argument as to God's existence. The problem basically lies in the formation of an assertion, which is either a true or false description. In an assertion, a predicate describes a subject by ascribing or denying some property to the object or class the subject denotes. When the denoted object or class substantially possesses the ascribed property or lacks the denied property as described by the assertion, it becomes true; but when the object or class lacks the ascribed property or possesses the denied property, it becomes false. Now, what it implies is that the justification of the truth-value of an assertion depends on the *existence* of the denoted object or class. Hence the *existence* of the subject becomes necessary for making assertions, and eventually, we become confined into the realm of existent things for making assertions. Thus we can truly assert 'Aristotle is a philosopher' and falsely assert 'Cows are carnivorous' only if 'Aristotle' and 'cows' denote an existing individual and at least one member of the class *cow* respectively, otherwise we cannot say anything true or false about them. If it is so, existence becomes a prerequisite for predication. And thus, existence restricts itself to become a predicate. However, in ordinary language, we significantly make assertions in which existence is being ascribed or denied. Some such assertions are 'Homer exists', 'Elephants exist', 'The author of *Waverly* exists', 'Pegasus does not exist', and so on. Now, a question is very pertinent here, if '...exists' is not a predicate then how are these statements to be justified as true and meaningful? The question seeks answers, and all the possible answers may be converged in two alternatives:

- (1) These statements are meaningless as existence wrongly posited at the predicate parts.

- (2) These statements are meaningful; hence existence is a predicate of a specified kind.

Some philosophers strictly maintain the first alternative; while some others attempt to justify the meaningfulness of those statements by explicating the nature of existence in accordance with their own philosophical perspectives.

## II

In all probability, most of the arguments against the predication of existence come forth from the critics of Descartes' Ontological Argument regarding God's existence. Descartes remarked in his fifth *Meditation* that 'existence is a property'. He held that just as a triangle cannot be a triangle without having three interior angles, similarly God is not to be God without having existence (Descartes, 1641/1911). The essence of God includes existence as an essential property of Him. Since the essence of God involves the notion of a perfect being, and since being cannot be perfect without having existence, saying 'God is perfect, but does not exist' is contradictory. Before Descartes, St. Anselm also believed that 'existence is a property of God'. But Descartes' argument triggered in the realm of philosophy to enlighten on existence.

From the perspective of criticizing Descartes' argument, Kant's view comes into focus. For him, existence cannot be included in the essence of God; since it is not a real property, rather it is merely a logical property. Hence God's existence cannot be inferred from the essence of God. He made a distinction between a 'merely logical' predicate and a 'real' predicate. When a subject is predicated of itself, the predicate is 'merely logical' one; whereas a 'real' predicate says something new about the subject. For instance, in the sentence 'All red roses are red' the predicate 'are red' is a merely logical one; but in the sentence 'Some flowers are red' the predicate 'are red' is real. By a 'real predicate' Kant actually intended to mean a determining predicate. He said: "...a determining predicate is a predicate which is added to the concept of the subject and enlarges it. Consequently, it must not be already contained in the concept" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781/1929, p.504).

Some predicative expressions like '...is red', '...are girls' can work as both types of a predicate in different contexts in which they occur, but '...exists' can never appear as a real predicate in any context. By using a real or determining predicate like

'X is red' or 'X is beautiful' we describe some facts about X and this description enlarges the concept of X. But in saying 'X exists' we do not describe any fact about X, and thus nothing is added to the concept of X. So 'exists' is not a real predicate at all. As Kant (1929) put it:

*'Being'* is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing. It is merely the positing of a thing, or of certain determinations, as existing in themselves. (p. 504)

Therefore, according to Kant, in saying "'God is' or 'There is God', we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject in itself with all its predicates" (CPR, 1929, p. 505).

Alongside Kant philosophers like J. Wisdom, A. J. Ayer, and C.D. Broad prescribed a type of absurdity that would follow if we consider 'exists' as a predicate. As they reached the same absurdity with different logical analyses, I am explicating only Ayer's analysis here. In the book *Language, Truth and Logic* (1946), Ayer unfurled the absurdity in this way: If we accept existence as property or predicate, all positive existential propositions (viz. 'This exists') and all negative existential propositions (viz. 'This does not exist') would turn into tautologies and self-contradictory respectively. Because the subject part of a proposition is constituted by a name (including general name, proper name, and description) which denotes an element/elements that existed in the actual world. In that case, we cannot succeed in saying of an element that 'This exists' or 'This does not exist'. When we say 'This exists', by adding 'exists' to 'This' we assert just the existence of *this* again, and the assertion actually says 'This (which exists) exists'. Thus the assertion turns into a tautology. In the same way the assertion 'This does not exist' says 'This (which exists) does not exist' and turns into a self-contradictory. For him, 'exists' in statements like 'God exists' or 'I exist' is merely a *sleeping partner* as it fails to act as a predicate. That's why he remarked that all the statements like these do not belong to the proper type of statements but to a degenerate class of statements (*The Problem of Knowledge*, 1956).

### III

Gottlob Frege conveyed a different explanation of Kantian thesis on 'real' and 'non-real predicates. For him, it is indubitably true that '...exists' is incapable of performing as a predicate in contexts like 'God exists', but it doesn't mean 'exists'

can never function as a predicate since in some other contexts like ‘Elephants exist’, ‘Tables exist’ etc. it really functions as a predicate. So, existence is no doubt a ‘real’ predicate, it is a real predicate of second-level. In order to make his contention cognizable, we need to understand some of the notions he used in this regard, such as ‘sense and reference’, ‘complete and incomplete expressions’, and ‘concept and object’.

Frege emphasized logically perfect language discarding ambiguous ordinary language. According to him, in a logically perfect language, every meaningful expression has a sense and a reference. In his paper “Über Sinn Und Bedeutung” he made a distinction between sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*). The reference of an expression is that to which it refers. And the sense of an expression is ‘the mode of presentation’ of the reference, and it determines the reference (*On Sense and Reference*, 1892/1960). For example, the name ‘Socrates’ refers to the person named Socrates and the act of referring is being determined by the sense that may be presented to us as ‘the Greek philosopher who taught Plato and drank hemlock in Athens’.

According to Frege, meaningful expressions are of two types- complete and incomplete. Complete expressions are the names of objects. Proper names, definite descriptions, and complete declarative sentences are considered complete expressions. So they all are names in a sense. The referents of proper names and definite descriptions are individuals, while the referents of declarative sentences are their truth-values. But Frege technically called both the referents ‘objects’. For him, objects are complete or saturated as having been referents of complete expressions which do not have any incompleteness within themselves. Incomplete expressions, on the other hand, are predicative expressions like ‘...is red’, ‘...is an elephant’ etc. These expressions have a type of incompleteness within themselves. The referents of incomplete expressions are concepts that are essentially incomplete or unsaturated analogous to the incompleteness of the corresponding expressions of which they are referents.

Frege had divided concepts into first-level and second-level by analogy with the distinction between first-order and second-order functions in mathematics. Accordingly, predicative expressions are of two types- first-level and second-level, as concepts are referents of predicative expressions. The incompleteness of a first-level

predicate and that of a second-level predicate are different in nature. The incomplete part of a first-level predicate is of such a nature that only complete expressions (names of objects) fit into it. Thus predicative expressions such as ‘...is a poet’, ‘...is an elephant’ and the like are called first-level predicates since we can significantly assert, ‘Rabindranath is a poet’ or ‘Ramu is an elephant’ as ‘Rabindranath’ and ‘Ramu’ being names of objects which fall under the concept of being a poet and the concept of being an elephant respectively. Hence, it is to be said that first-level predicates are predicates of objects. On the other hand, predicative expressions being incomplete by themselves do not fit into the incomplete part of a first-level predicate rather they fit into the incomplete part of a second-level predicate. Thus second-level predicates are to be regarded as predicates of concepts. Hence first-level predicates cannot be predicated of concepts, and second-level predicates cannot be predicated of objects. We are capable of saying something of an object by using first-level predicates and that of a concept by using second-level predicates. What can be said of an object cannot be said of a concept and vice versa. As Frege put it: “Second-level concepts, which concepts fall under, are essentially different from first-level concepts, which objects fall under” (*On Concept and Object*, 1892/1960, p. 50).

For Frege, ‘exists’ is a second-level predicate. He called “existence a property of a concept” (*CO*, 1960, pp. 48-49). And for this, it cannot be applied to objects, i.e. object’s name cannot be inserted into its incomplete part. That’s why, we cannot significantly make assertions like ‘Julius Caesar exists’, ‘Rabindranath exists’ or ‘Pegasus does not exist’ because in each of these sentences we are inserting a name of an object into the incomplete part of the predicate ‘exists’. Such sentences, for Frege, make no sense because they are not well-formed. As Frege said:

I don’t want to say it is false to assert about an object what is asserted here about a concept; I want to say it is impossible, senseless, to do so. ‘There is Julius Caesar’ is neither true nor false but senseless. (*CO*, 1960, p. 51)

As a second-level predicate ‘exists’ can be predicated of concepts only, we can say ‘Elephants exist’ because by saying this we assert that the concept of elephant has instances in the actual world or something falls within it. In this regard Frege pointed out that we can significantly say ‘there is at least one square root of 4’ but we cannot say ‘The square root of 4 exists’. The former says about the concept ‘square root of 4’ that it is not empty, something falls within it. We can truly say ‘2 is a square root of

4'. But in the latter existence has improperly attributed to *the squire root of 4* which is an object being the reference of a definite description 'The squire root of 4'. This is how Frege considered 'exists' as a real predicate, a predicate of second-level.

Russell logically upheld the possibility of the predicative use of 'exists'. He, following Frege, conceived that "[e]xistence propositions do not say anything about the actual individual but only about the class or function" (*The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, 1918/1956, p.234). He claimed that existence is not a property of any individual, rather it is "essentially a property of a propositional function" (*PLA*, 1956, p.232). Therefore, 'exists' can be used as a predicate of a propositional function. A propositional function is an expression containing one or more variables and is such that if those variables are replaced by appropriate values, a proposition results. Thus, for example, 'x is a man', 'x is a unicorn', 'y = successor of 3' are all propositional functions in the sense that if we replace the variables (viz. 'x', 'y', etc.) by appropriate values they result in propositions.

According to Russell, we can make significant assertions like 'Men exist'. In saying 'Men exist' we are actually asserting that the propositional function 'x is a man' is sometimes true, i.e. it has at least one instance in which it is true. This is the fundamental meaning of the word 'existence' (Russell, 1956). With the help of the existential quantifier and variable, we may express 'Men exist' as ' $(\exists x) (x \text{ is man})$ ' or ' $(\exists x) Mx$ '. Here the quantifier ' $(\exists x)$ ' expresses existence and it is attached to the propositional function '(x is man)' in which "x" is variable. So it is to be said that our statement affirms the existence of a propositional function. But we cannot meaningfully assert 'Rabindranath exists' or the like if 'Rabindranath' or else is treated as a logically proper name<sup>1</sup>. Because in that case the meaningfulness of 'Rabindranath exists' compels us to accept meaningfulness of 'Rabindranath does not exist' according to the *principle of significant negation*, i.e. if a sentence is meaningful, then its denial is also meaningful. Now if *Rabindranath* does not exist then 'Rabindranath' does not refer to anything and hence 'Rabindranath' would be

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<sup>1</sup> A logically proper name is devoid of any descriptive content; it only refers to a particular which is its meaning. Only demonstrative pronouns, such as 'this', 'that', 'it', 'I' etc., are logically proper names.

meaningless. Thus by following that very principle ‘Rabindranath exists’ would become meaningless too.

But if we treat ‘Rabindranath’ as an ordinary proper name, then it would be meaningful. Because every ordinary proper name, for Russell, is actually a disguised definite description (a phrase of the form “the so-and so”). Hence the name ‘Rabindranath’ is equivalent to ‘The author of *Gitanjali*’. This enables us to logically transform the assertion ‘Rabindranath exists’ into ‘The author of *Gitanjali* exists’, and thus it becomes meaningful. Russell (1920) said:

The proposition ‘the so-and-so exists’ is significant whether true or false, but if *a* is the so-and-so (where ‘*a*’ is a name), the words ‘*a* exists’ are meaningless. It is only descriptions- definite or indefinite- that existence can be significantly asserted.... (pp. 178-179)

For Russell, the logical structure of the assertion ‘The author of *Gitanjali* exists’ is of a conjunctive proposition, and its conjuncts negate the conditions - (i) no one wrote *Gitanjali*, and (ii) more than one person wrote *Gitanjali*- which make the assertion false. So, the assertion inevitably involves the following conjuncts into its logical form:

- (a) at least one person wrote *Gitanjali*, and
- (b) at most one person wrote *Gitanjali*.

This can be expressed in technical language with the help of an existential quantifier and variables in the following way:

$(\exists x) [x \text{ is an author of } Gitanjali \text{ and } (y) ( \text{if } y \text{ is an author of } Gitanjali \text{ then } y = x )]$

It can further be symbolized as :  $(\exists x)[Ax.(y)(Ay \supset y=x)]$

[Ax: x is author of *Gitanjali*]

[Ay: y is author of *Gitanjali*]

Through this analysis, we find that ‘The author of *Gitanjali*’ has disappeared and what remains constant is propositional function. So the assertion is not about any individual, rather it is about propositional function. Here the predicate ‘exists’ is properly attributed to a propositional function. Therefore, after Russell, propositions like ‘Pegasus does not exist’ are to be analyzed as propositions containing definite descriptions, and in this particular case as ‘The winged horse does not exist’. So, Russell is also of the opinion that ‘exists’ is a predicate, although a predicate of a propositional function.

What is being revealed from the discussion we made is that predicative use of 'exists' is possible and it is limited to concepts, classes, or propositional functions only. So a sentence containing 'exists' or 'does not exist' as a predicate would be well-formed only if the predicate follows a subject which is either a concept word, a class name, a definite description, or an ordinary proper name. But we cannot add 'exists' or 'does not exist' to a logically proper name in making assertions. Because to "attempt to do so would make the sentence unconstruable" (Strawson, 1959, p.239). Hence we cannot make assertions like 'I exist', 'It exists' etc. in which subject terms are logically proper names. But if it is possible to transform logically proper names into descriptions then these sentences will also be meaningful. In this regard, Quine (1948/1963) has suggested a method, in the essay "On what there is", by which all kinds of proper names can be transformed into definite descriptions. A logically proper name can be reduced to a definite description in the following way (Shaw, 1988):

- (1) a is F
- (2) The thing which is-a (or a-ises) is F.

Hence the sentence 'This is a man' can be reduced to "The thing which is- this (or this-ises) is a man. Quine has followed Russell's theory of description by which he eliminated all definite descriptions in terms of quantifiers and variables. In his notation the sentence 'This is a man' would take the following form:

$(\exists x)(Tx.(y)(Ty \supset x=y). Mx)$ , where "T" stands for "this-ises" and "M" for "is a man".

In this way, singular terms such as "I", "this", and "that" can be translated into logical notations of variables and quantifiers. For example, 'I exist' would take the following form:

$(\exists x)(Ix.(y)(Iy \supset x=y))$ , where "I" stands for "i-ises".

Therefore, by accepting this method existence propositions containing logically proper names as subjects can be construable. Thus 'exists' may be coherently taken as a predicate to whatsoever the subject term is. So we may say 'exists' is a real predicate of a specified kind, and the predication of existence is possible.

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