

Are there any non-existent things?

By Andrew Peasgood

To the enquiry 'What exists?' Willard v.O. Quine (1908-2000) answers, straightforwardly, 'everything'. By corollary, there is nothing that does not exist. But what have we granted to things, to say they exist? We may be saying only 'that it is', not 'what it is'. Do things possess existence as a property? If so, can we isolate and define the nature of that property? Doing so would allow us to seek things that may not possess it. Those things would, by virtue of such absence, not have existence: they would, accordingly, be non-existent.

In attempts to explain the nature of existence, the essential characteristics of objects have been variously identified. Aristotle (in his 'Categories') described 'substance'; medieval theologians opted for 'essence'; 'natural' has been used to describe favoured entities; and more recently particular things have been categorised as having 'actuality'. In making a definition a boundary is created. These various attempts may locate the line above which there is existence, but they all inevitably create a zone below, into which must fall those troublesome things that reside outside the set of existent objects. Analyses differ in detail, so there can be debate over where the line is drawn, but all acknowledge that only some things exist, and that, therefore, others do not - or must instead have some other status.

What things might so be troublesome, and what might be their status? We have little difficulty granting 'existence' to 'real' things around us - that chair, this house, Boris Johnson - as concrete entities: individual, identifiable, independent of all other things. What are we to make, though, of non-present entities? 'Real' things, yes, but that do not exist now, in the present, but which instead have existed in the past or will exist in the future: what is the nature of their existence? Of things gone we either have remains, such as skeletons, archaeological traces, or recordings - in which case perhaps they are not gone - or we have only memories. For future things, all we have of them in the present is, at most, expectation and imagination. Of some future things we have no current conception. We cannot know of all the things that might be known. Their nature has become less real.

We live within a world occupied also by many other entities classified as abstract: things such as qualities, quantities, relations. These lack substance, and we may disagree 'where' they are located: throughout space and time, or beyond it? But to the extent that our universe could not function without them, they exist, at the very least in our language and in our thought. It may be argued that we have brought them into existence, that they exist only through dependence upon us and other 'real' entities, but does that necessarily condemn them to a lesser class of existence than their concrete counterparts?

It is by acknowledging the existence of objects of thought that we identify more of our awkward contenders. Not only are there ideas of real objects (such as those memories of past objects), but there are also ideas of 'unreal' objects. We may contemplate fictitious entities (such as Inspector Clouseau or Spider-Man); possible, or contingent entities (my as yet unconceived child, who may never exist as a particular); and even impossible entities (contradictory or nonsensical things, such as round squares, or the cube root of orange).

Can we bring together these various types of things under one heading of existent? To do so we may have to accept that 'exists' has no essential spatio-temporal connotation. This allows us to consider treating possible and contingent things, although 'unactualised' (having no concrete instantiations) to exist, either as possible objects in an actual world, or as actual objects in a possible world. (Refer to, for example: Armstrong, 1989; Plantinga, 1976; Lewis, 1986). But such approaches do not apply readily to fictitious things. These do seem to exist within this world: we

talk about them, we can relate them to real objects. By bringing things into existence through language and thought we have given them an intentional existence. We can name them in sentences and make true statements involving them. (We can truthfully say, for example, that there are more murders in Midsomer than in Midlothian.) But how can we be ontologically committed to such fictional things to the extent we can truthfully claim that, say, Spider-Man, exists?

If we abandon the search for a unifying nature of existent things, perhaps we can consider them together through a unity of predication. Quine (1948), following the modern analytic approach, argues existence is asserted by the existential quantifier (the, some, all ...). "To be is, purely and simply, to be the value of a variable". If we maintain there is one form of existence only (and no other categories) then we need not use 'exists' as a predicate. We need not say 'the dog exists': simply to refer to 'the dog' will suffice. But if, similarly, we say 'Spider-Man', we have no means to deny his existence. He exists as much as the dog does. The conundrum is that if instead we require predication we make existence a property, that may not be possessed by all things. To say, then, that 'Spider-Man does not exist' is to make a statement of negative existence: that something has to exist to be placed in a sentence, thereby making a contradiction of the claim that the same thing does not exist.

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) addressed implied existence (such as of Spider-Man) by saying that most terms in ordinary language that are of reference are actually definite descriptions, albeit disguised. A name is an incomplete symbol, requiring contextual support. We should re-frame the statement 'Spider-Man exists', therefore, towards 'There is a unique thing with the body of a man and which can spin webs'. This approach allows us to refute Spider-Man's claimed existence by truthfully saying 'there is no unique thing ... (with those properties)'.

With doubts such as these over possibilities and 'logical fictions', we appear to be denied a satisfactory way to confirm all things as similarly 'existent'. But if the set of 'things' is greater than the set of things deemed 'existing', how then should we treat the sub-division of the set of things? By accepting some things as non-existing. Alexius Meinong (1853-1920), arguing we should avoid a 'prejudice for the actual', set out a theory of non-existent objects which accepted that some things cannot be shown to have actuality or existence, but 'just are what they are'. His theory - criticised, but revisited and revised since his death - thereby provides a possible home for those things that are not admitted to the category of 'existent'.

Although Russell was one of the critics of Meinong's theory, he had himself proposed a category separate to existence: "For what does not exist must be something, or it would be meaningless to deny its existence: and hence we need the concept of being, as that belongs even to the non-existent". ('The Principles of Mathematics', 1903). Linguistically alone, it is interesting to compare Russell's 'being' with Meinong's 'sosein', or 'being-so'.

This use of the verb 'to be' brings us back to the original question. "Are there any non-existent things?" it asks, thereby avoiding the potentially contradictory 'E and also not-E' alternative, "Do any non-existent objects exist?". In so doing it allows the possibility of alternatives to 'existence', by whatever name. Meinong and Russell both accept this. Indeed Russell arguably goes further, suggesting that non-existence is just one possible alternative to existence. But let us not be greedy. To the original question, "Are there non-existent things?", we can answer affirmatively.

As I have tried to show, this is because we can question the existence of some things, noting significant differences between 'types' of thing, differences that it is impossible, without contradiction arising, to reconcile together under one common banner of 'existence'. A separate category is required. If something is not within the category of existence, then it seems

appropriate to place it under the heading of non-existence. It may be the case that such description is not wholly logically defensible, but, contra Russell, it need not offend a 'robust sense of reality'. Non-existence is a valid category to which we can consign those things that fail to meet criteria of 'existence'.

Before closing, I should point out that non-existent is not, however, a synonym for 'nothing'. Returning to Quine, the appropriate response to his (rhetorically intended) question "Non-being must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not?" would simply be, 'nothing'.

Here I will stop, grateful that we were not asked the further question, 'Does nothing exist?' Would our reply to that be to say that nothing does not exist; that there is not nothing; or that nothing is not? Is even a bare 'No' satisfactory? It seems impossible to express a conception of nothingness that does not entail the trappings of existence. We should be grateful, therefore, to have non-existence available to us for unruly things.

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