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A NOTE ON SINGULAR AND GENERAL EXISTENCE

The statement

(1) Mock exists

is an example of a *singular existence statement* because the expression 'Mock' is a singular term, an expression which purports to refer to one and only one thing. But the statement

(2) Politicians exist

is an example of a *general existence statement* because the expression 'Politicians' is a general term, an expression which is true, severally, of many objects if of any objects at all.

Frege apparently held that (2) is meaningful, and that the expression 'exist' is not a first level predicate because (2) is shorthand for

(3) There exist politicians,

a statement which predicates there being something of politicians; it is true just in case the concept referred to by the concept-word 'politicians' has the property of something falling under it.

With the advent of free logic, (1) has a straightforward translation into

(4) Things the same as Mock exist¹,

which on the Fregean model is shorthand for

(5) There exist things the same as Mock,

a statement which is not logically true, contra classical predicate logic. (5) is true because the concept referred to by the expression 'things the same as Mock' does have the property of something falling under it.

In general, every singular existence statement can be translated into a general existence statement of the form in (5), and so apparently the Fregean doctrine that existence is a higher level property holds universally; that is, it does not require the multitude of familiar and tortured arguments constructed during this century to explain away singular existence claims when the assumed underlying logic is classical predicate logic, a logic in which statements of the form in (4) are regarded as logically true and hence intuitively are unavailable without caveat as explications of non logically true cases like (1).

But translations are tricky customers. Indeed, a translation is also possible in which all general existence statements can be translated into statements in which existence can be construed as a first level

property – if one must speak of properties – of individuals. This is not news because Quine made essentially the same point in 1960 in his opus *Word and Object*. The idea is this: the locution 'There exists an object x such that --- x ---' is seen as shorthand for 'There is an object x such that x exists and --- x ---' in which the predicate 'exists' consorts with the individual variable ' x '. The upshot is that the general existence statement in (2) gets translated into

(6) There is an individual such that it exists

and is a politician,

which contains as a subpart the singular existence sentence 'it exists', a sentence which appears to be about individuals, and not about the concept referred to by the word 'politician'. Indeed, the paraphrase of general existence statements a la Frege, it may be argued, "presupposes" that the quantifier idiom 'There is a (an) object ---' has existential force, a presupposition which can be made explicit only with the help of singular existence contexts of the form '--- exists'.

How then is one to decide the issue of what the basic existence context is – or ought to be – and hence whether existence is a first level property or a higher order property? First, it should be pointed out that for Quinians the issue is easily settled. Positively speaking, existence is a first order property, and a trivial one at that; for any singular existence statement of the form ' t exists', where ' t ' is a constant singular term ('Mock', for instance) can always be paraphrased as 'There is an object x such that x exists and is the same as t '. But contexts of the form ' x exists' are trivially true in the Quinian scheme of things since ' x ' can not fail to designate an existent (though which one varies from context to context). The paraphrase of general existence statements, on the other hand, follows the same strategy as is evident in (6) above. Moreover, negatively speaking, the Fregean alternative is no real alternative for the Quinian because sentences of the form (2) – (5) are not genuine predications containing as they do only general terms; for Quine, general terms are not a kind of referring expression and hence (2) – (5) can not be predications even when occupying grammatical subject position – as in (2). So there is nothing being referred to for the rest of the sentence to talk about which is the essence of a predication. On the other hand, one cannot substitute the singular term corre-

1. In fact, in a language like that classical predicate logic but without identity it can be proved that (1) has no translation.

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late for the general term in (2) – (5) to get a genuine predication – say, ‘politicianhood’ (or ‘the property of being a politician’) for ‘politician’ – without thereby changing entirely the meaning of the original sentence. For now what is being asserted is that the kind (or property) purported to be referred to by the substitute singular term ‘politicianhood’ (or ‘the property of being a politician’) exists whereas in (2), for example, the topic of concern for Quinians is not kinds (or properties) but individuals. The upshot is that Frege’s doctrine that existence is a higher level property, which seems to presuppose that (2) – (5) are predications, is ill-founded.

But what about non-Quinians who are not so fussy about the referring status of general terms? It seems to me, nevertheless, that a good case can be made for the primacy of contexts of the form ‘--- exists’, and hence for the doctrine that existence is a first order property after all, much tradition to the contrary notwithstanding. For contexts of the form ‘There is an object x such that --’ do not, or should not, be construed as having existential force. Hence when someone chooses to use such locutions with existential force, singular contexts of the form ‘ x exists’ (in which, to repeat, evidently existence is a first order property if a property at all) will be needed to make intentions explicit.

I am not relying on any appeal to ordinary language here for evidence of the thin blooded character of the quantifier context ‘There is an object x such that ---’, but rather on philosophical reasons which can be ignored only on pain of inexpressibility, palpable falsehood or inconvenience.

Consider the argument from palpable falsehood first. It is, I believe, wholly true that

(7) Something doesn’t exist.

This statement is trivially false, however, if the quantifier word ‘Something’ has existential force. Nevertheless many have resisted (7) on the ground that it presupposes nonexistent objects. But (7), contrary to philosophical apprehension, does not necessarily presuppose nonexistent objects. For if one chooses the substitutional interpretation of the quantifier, (7) is true if there is just one statement of the form ‘--- does not exist’ is true. e.g., ‘The round square does not exist’. There are many non-Meinongians who think that the statement in question is true and that the expression ‘The round square’ is a genuine singular term. So one may believe in the truth of (7) without

having to embrace nonexistent objects. Indeed, if one is willing to tolerate individual concepts, (7) can be rendered true even on an objectual interpretation – a la Alonzo Church or Rudolf Carnap – without having to tolerate nonexistent individuals. That is, (7) will be true just in case there is an empty individual concept (one under which nothing falls, in Fregeian terms).

On the matter of inexpressibility, if one wishes to give full expression to Meinong’s doctrine, one must allow for quantifiers having no existential force. This point has been made by several people; among others, Routley, Parsons and me. Now no matter how distasteful Meinong’s ontological doctrine of *Aussersein* may strike one, it seems the height of philosophical churlishness to disallow it full expression. Indeed, much of what passes as sensible talk in the philosophical semantics of modern modal logic would also get unceremoniously dumped.

There is also an important method of definability vis a vis singular terms to consider, a method which would suffer if the quantifiers were not presumed to be basically neutral (in a language which allows irreferential singular terms). This, like the first reason, cited above is independent of one’s favorite ontological stance. In free logics, the quantifier context ‘There is an object x such that ---’, like its counterpart in classical predicate logic, has existential force; ‘There is an object x such that ---’ is shorthand for ‘There is an object x such that x exists and ---’. But because, contrary to classical predicate logic, genuine singular terms can fail to refer to existents (‘Vulcan’ (the planet), for instance), the following is not logically true:

(8) $A(t)$ if and only if there exists an object x such that both $x = t$ & $A(x)$.

Here ‘ A ’ is any context, simple or complex, containing a singular term or variable. Now (8) is very important vis a vis the eliminability of singular terms from all contexts. Because of (8) it suffices to have a definition of a singular term in identity contexts alone to ensure complete eliminability from all contexts. One of the losses that must be sustained when restricted quantifiers are used, and the logic is free, is the loss of this method of defining singular terms. For the most that can be obtained is the elimination of *referential* singular terms in all contexts because (8) holds provided the singular term ‘ t ’ refers to an existent – that is, provided ‘ t exists’ is true.