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On Two Arguments about the Logical Status of 'Exists'

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A classic post-Kantian argument for the claim that existence is not a genuine property of particulars goes roughly as follows.

AI: Argument from the Logical Status of 'Exists'

1. If existence is a genuine property of particulars, then the verb TO EXIST has first-level occurrences.
2. TO EXIST does not have first-level occurrences.
3. Existence is not a genuine property of particulars.

In the words of S.G. Williams (1995, 'Existence' in Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa, *A Companion to Metaphysics*, Oxford, Blackwell), 145-50, 145), advocates of AI.2 'treat "exists" not as...a *first-level* predicate, a predicate true of *individuals*, but as a *second-level* (or...an $n + 1$ th-level) predicate, a predicate of first-level (or n th-level) concepts.' Let us consider two arguments against AI.2. Here is the first.

AII: Argument from Complex Predicates

1. If TO EXIST is never a first-level predicate, then no complex first-level predicate can have an occurrence of TO EXIST as a part.
2. Some complex first-level predicates do have an occurrence of TO EXIST as a part.
3. TO EXIST is sometimes a first-level predicate.

AII.2 is supposedly illustrated by modally and temporally modified singular existentials, such as ‘This article might not have existed’ and ‘This article did not exist until 2007’.

The second argument against AI.2 is:

AIII: Argument by Analogy with TO DISAPPEAR

1. TO DISAPPEAR has first-level usages: ‘Lord Lucan has disappeared.’
2. TO DISAPPEAR has second-level usages: ‘Dodos have disappeared’.
3. The logical syntax of TO EXIST is analogous to that of TO DISAPPEAR.
4. TO DISAPPEAR has both first- and second-level usages.
5. TO EXIST has both first- and second-level usages.
6. TO EXIST is sometimes a first-level predicate.

The examples, which we will see to be flawed, are from Williams (1995, 147).

The claims I will defend are that (i) the above version of AIII fails; (ii) an amended version of AIII (AIV below) reduces to AII; (iii) AII begs the question against the proponent of AI.2; (iv) neither AII nor any version of AIII discussed here genuinely threatens AI.

Even setting aside its analogical status, AIII fails. AIII either requires that TO DISAPPEAR is semantically ambiguous or trades on semantically distinct analogical usages of that verb. In what follows, assume that Lord Lucan has gone missing, that we wish neither to assert nor to deny that he is alive, and that the dodo is extinct.

TO DISAPPEAR sometimes means TO GO MISSING and sometimes means TO DIE OUT/BECOME EXTINCT. On our assumptions, it is the first that applies to Lucan and the second that applies to dodos.

The important point is that (regardless of whether TO DISAPPEAR is semantically ambiguous or whether we merely have semantically distinct analogical usages of it over AIII.1 and AIII.2) we are not dealing with semantically the same verb over AIII.1 and AIII.2. AIII does not, therefore, establish that semantically the same verb has both first- and second-level uses. AIII can be shorn of this flaw if we replace occurrences of TO DISAPPEAR with occurrences of TO PERISH, giving:

AIV: Argument by Analogy with TO PERISH

1. TO PERISH has first-level usages: 'Lord Lucan has perished.'
2. TO PERISH has second-level usages: 'Dodods have perished'.
3. The logical syntax of TO EXIST is analogous to that of TO PERISH.
4. TO PERISH has both first- and second-level usages.
5. TO EXIST has both first- and second-level usages.
6. TO EXIST is sometimes a first-level predicate.

In the sense, or usage, of TO PERISH at play in AIV.1, 'Lord Lucan has perished' means that Lord Lucan no longer exists. 'Dodods have perished' is quantificationally ambiguous. If we change the example to 'All dodods have perished and none are left' or to 'The dodo has perished' then we have a sentence that expresses that the species is extinct. In the latter case, we arguably have a first-level occurrence of TO PERISH, depending upon whether the species counts as a particular. 'The dodo has perished' might be interpreted as expressing the same claim that 'The dodo used to exist, but no longer does' expresses. The latter sentence, in turn, might be seen as one in which the logical syntax of the occurrence of TO EXIST differs from the occurrence in 'Dodods used to exist but now there are none', which is a second-level occurrence. On this view, the two most recently mentioned sentences exhibit syntactic diversity in respect of how TO EXIST is working, but are semantically equivalent. But the important point lies elsewhere: the examples in AIV.1 and AIV.2 are paraphrases of sentences employing complex predicates (such as 'no longer exists') in which usages of TO EXIST feature as parts. In respect of AIV.1, everything depends upon whether AII works. AIII failed, we tried to save it by turning it into AIV, but AIV is redundant: the action should be concentrated on the assessment of AII.2.

AII.2, however, begs the question against the proponent of AI.2. AII.2 can only be espoused if AII.3 is already presumed. Whether or not TO EXIST has first-level occurrences, AII is not a good argument for a positive answer. The proponent of AII adopts AII.1 on the back of a compositional approach to logical form. AII.1 has it that if a complex predicative expression is first-level, then so is any predicative expression the complex predicative expression has as a proper part. Acceptance of such compositionality, however, ought to be turned against AII.2 by the proponent of AI. If, as the proponent of AI maintains, TO EXIST has no first-level occurrences, then no complex predicate (whether modally, temporally or otherwise qualified) that is built up from it can be a first-level predicate. Any such appearance must be dismissed, as with the case of simpler singular existentials, as involving sentences in which TO EXIST occurs in ways which mislead us about logical syntax.

The original version of AIII fails, our amended version reduces to AII and AII begs the question. So AI is left intact.