

PREDICATE AND PROPERTY

I

It all started with St. Anselm, when perfectly *convinced* by faith in the existence of God, he tried to prove the existence of God by what has come to be called 'The Ontological Argument'. Incidentally, this argument so-called is wrongly attributed to St. Anselm since he did not use the expression. In fact, it was Kant who first named it as such. But let that pass.

The proof for God's existence that St. Anselm put forward purports to prove, simply from the concept of God as the supreme being, that God's existence cannot rationally be doubted by anyone having such a concept of Him. It is, thus, a purely *a priori* argument, that is to say, one that does not appeal to any facts of experience but is concerned solely with the *implications of concepts*, in this case, the concept of God, the central idea of the argument being that perfection implies existence. It should be stressed here that his argument presupposes no belief in the existence of God. It presupposes only the concept of God, that is to say, the concept of an absolutely supreme being, and for this no religious faith at all is required.

Kant expressed the refutation best in his claim that existence is no *predicate*. He held that having described a thing one adds nothing to the description of it by adding that it exists. There is no contradiction, he held, in denying of anything whatever, including a being than which no greater can be conceived, that it exists. A contradiction arises, Kant insisted, only when incompatible properties are predicated of one and the same thing. (cf. Strawson: *Introduction to Logical Theory*) The denial that God exists, however, involves no such predication.

This seems to be a fatal blow to the so-called ontological argument. It seems to be generally accepted that no one can pass from the mere conception or idea of a thing to the conclusion that a thing thus conceived actually exists or that it does not exist. *Some proof of existence is needed that a mere description does not supply.*

But although it may be accepted that the existence of a thing cannot be inferred or proved from the mere description of it, it may *not* be accepted that the same can be said about its *non-existence*. That is to say it can be simply maintained that solely from the description of the thing, that the thing in question is impossible, and properly concluding from this that it does not, therefore, exist (e.g. square-circle). And this inference is not only a legitimate inference but a very common one when it is the non-existence of something that is inferred. And as Richard Taylor puts it, "One might maintain that God's existence cannot be proved by a consideration of the concept of God, but one cannot do so on the ground that *no* conclusions concerning what exists can be derived solely from our conceptions of things, for that is not true".

From Anselm's 'perfection implies existence' to Kant's 'existence is not a predicate' is a long way indeed from ontology to logic. And since Kant's time the issue most debated has centered round the question 'is existence a predicate', quite independently of the ontological argument. Let us, therefore, follow the issue leaving the ontological argument apart for some time. We will return to it in section III.

II

The direction which this controversy takes is mostly due to G. E. Moore's paper 'Is existence a predicate?'¹ in which we do not find any mention of the ontological argument. Moore starts by distinguishing between the use of "exist" and "growl" by considering two sentences viz. "Tame tigers exist" and "Tame tigers growl" and makes the following points.

1. While the sentence "Tame tigers growl" seems ambiguous, since it might mean "All tame tigers growl" or "Most/Some tame tigers growl", there does not seem to be any ambiguity in "Tame tigers exist".
2. Moore says, "We can say that one important difference between the use of "growl" in "some tame tigers growl" and the use of "exist" in "some tame tigers exist", is that if in the former case we insert "do not" before "growl", without changing the meaning of "growl", we get a sentence which is

significant, whereas if, in the latter, we insert "do not" before "exist", without changing the meaning of "exist", we get a sentence which has no meaning whatever".

And if by the statement that "growl" in this usage, "stands for an attribute", whereas "exist", in this usage, does not, then I should agree that "exist" in this usage does not "stand for an attribute" (Moore, p. 119)

However, Moore concedes that a meaning *can* be given to "Some tame tigers do not exist". Thus he says, "The sentence "There are some tame tigers which do not exist" is certainly significant, if it means only that there are some imaginary tigers in either of the two senses" (Ibid, p. 120) (viz. in fiction and hallucination).

3. Referring Russell's interpretation of "Some men are Greeks" to mean that the propositional function 'x is a man and a Greek' is sometimes true, Moore remarks, "We can say that one feature about our use of "growl" is that, if we consider a "value" of a propositional function which is such that "Some tame tigers growl" means that at least two values of it are true, then the singular word "growl" can be used, with the same meaning, in the expression of such a value. And perhaps this may be the part of what is meant by saying that "growl" stands for an attribute". (Ibid, p. 122)

Can we say the same thing about "Some tame tigers exist"? Here we enter into the most interesting point in the controversy between Moore and Russell.

Russell's treatment of 'existence' is implied in his, what Ramsay had called 'a paradigm' of philosophy, viz, his Theory of Definite Descriptions.²

Russell analyses the proposition, "The daughter of Hitler is a Soprano" as a conjunction of two propositions, the first being the proposition, "Hitler had one daughter" and the second one being, "She is a soprano (singer)". The first proposition, Russell points out, involves the idea of existence, because it means that the daughter of Hitler exists. Russell's main point about existence is that it does not qualify things directly, in the way in which shapes and colours qualify them. It does not qualify things even indirectly through their properties and relations. For *under analysis existence is transformed into a property*

of propositional functions, the property of having instances, which Russell calls 'possibility'. "This theory", says David Pears, "is, in part, a precise formulation of the rather vague philosophical thesis that existence is not a predicate" (*Bertrand Russell and the British Tradition in Philosophy*, p. 64). But it is not enough to say that it is not a predicate. For what this means is that it is not an ordinary predicate and it needs to be explained how existence differs from them. Kant provided part of the explanation in his critique of the ontological proof for the existence of God. He pointed out that, whereas ordinary predicates may be included in the definition of a thing, existence cannot be included. You cannot say of a thing that it must exist because it has been defined as existing. For a definition can give a description of a thing as it would be if it did exist and the question whether it does exist is the question whether there is something that satisfies that description.

Russell seems to take up this thread when he introduces the concept of 'satisfying a propositional function'. For example unicorns might be described as 'equine (like a horse) and equipped with one horn', and Russell would take these adjectives in the context of the proposition 'This is equine and equipped with one horn'. Then in order to get a translation of the proposition that unicorns exist, Russell makes two moves. First he strikes out the word 'this' and leaves a blank in the proposition. The result, '—is equine and equipped with one horn' is what he calls a 'propositional function'. His second move is to introduce the concept of 'satisfying a propositional function'; an individual satisfies a propositional function, if and only if the insertion of its name in the vacancy of the propositional function produces a true proposition. Then the meaning of the proposition, that unicorns exist, is that the propositional function '—is equine and equipped with one horn' is satisfied. In this translation no mention is made of properties. Their place has been taken by propositional functions. Thus according to Russell, "We say that 'men exist' or 'a man exists', if the propositional function 'x is human' is sometimes true".

It is this point of Russell's that Moore is contesting. As he says, "Owing to this view of his that "Some tame tigers exist" means the same as "Some values of the propositional function 'x is a tame tiger' are true", Mr. Russell has been led

to say, "Existence is essentially a property of a propositional function" and "It is of propositional functions that you can assert or deny existence" and that it is a fallacy to transfer 'to the individual that satisfies a propositional function, a predicate which only applies to a propositional function'. So that, according to him, existence is, after all, in this usage, a "property" or "predicate", though not a property of individuals, but only of propositional functions". (Moore, p. 123).

Moore says, "I think this is a mistake on his part. Even if it is true that "Some tame tigers exist" means the same as "Some values of 'x is a tame tiger' are true" it does not follow, I think, that we can say that "exist" means the same as "is sometimes true", and "some tame tigers" the same as "x is a tame tiger". (Ibid, p. 123).

Strawson in his 'Introduction to Logical Theory' has described how "The logical character of sentences whose use to make statements presupposes the *existence* of something referred to by their grammatical subjects" by maintaining that the question of whether statements exemplifying the Aristotelian forms of *general statements* are true or false is one that does not arise *unless* the subject-class has members. (cf. Chapt. 6). He further maintains that such an interpretation can be given even of *Singular Statements* and considers Russell's theory of Definite Descriptions as a 'classical illustration' of the 'error' of not noticing the nature of general statements as explained by Strawson. The reason for such an 'error' according to Strawson, is 'the operation of the bogus trichotomy, true, false or meaningless'. To put very briefly the theory can be summed up by holding that if the sentence is of the subject predicate form, then, if it is not meaningless, it must be *about* something; so the form of the sentence, 'The King of France is wise' is either meaningless or there is a king of France for it to be about. But since there is no king of France, the conclusion is drawn that it is not a subject-predicate sentence and the existential analysis is adopted instead. On that analysis, the sentence is false (and hence significant) if there is no king of France. Thus it is argued, holds Strawson, that this analysis provides the only acceptable means of reconciling the fact that sentence is meaningful with the fact that there does not happen to be a king of France.

According to Strawson these arguments 'lose their power' if we keep in mind the distinction between sentence and statement. "For a sentence of the statement-making type to have meaning" holds Strawson, "it is not necessary that every use of it, at any time at any place, should result in a true or false statement. It is enough that it should be possible to describe or imagine circumstances in which its use would result in a true or false statement. For a referring phrase to have meaning it is not necessary that on every occasion of its use there should be something to which it refers" (Strawson, p. 185). The whole mistake is due to maintaining that the meaning of any genuine expression is taken to be *identical with the object to which it applies*. According to Strawson even the proper names would not 'fill the bill.' One can significantly ask, using a proper name, 'Did N exist?'. The same name can be borne by many different creatures or things and in no case is the meaning of a name identical with a creature or thing which bears it. "To bestow a name", says Strawson, "is not to give a word a meaning. Names, then, do not satisfy the requirement". (Ibid, p. 190).

Thus Strawson's position about the status of statements of the pattern of 'x's Exist' is that the existential statements cannot be assimilated to any of the four forms or be regarded as a subject predicate statement at all. And in doing so, as perhaps Russell is doing, "We should be faced with the absurd result that the question of whether it was true or false could arise only if it were true. This gives a new edge to the familiar philosophical observation that 'exists' is not a predicate. When we declare or deny that 'there are' things of such and such a description or that things of such and such a description 'exist', the use of the quoted phrases is *not to be assimilated* either to the predicative or to the referring use of expression." (Ibid, p. 191)

Russell in his "Mr. Strawson on referring", takes a note of Strawson's arguments criticizing Russell's theory of descriptions, and holds, in short, that Strawson has indented the two problems which Russell regarded as quite distinct—namely the problem of descriptions and the problem of egocentricity. (What the egocentric words refer to depends upon when and where they are used.)

III

C. B. Martin³ makes a distinction between 'God' as a *proper name*, and 'God' as a *concept*. 'God (concept) is good' is analytic, 'God (proper name) is good' is synthetic, and learned, if at all, by experience. This view can be taken about 'exists' also. Thus when we say 'God exists', 'God' can be taken either as a proper name or as a concept. And then 'God (concept) exists' will be analytic, while, 'God (proper name) exists' will be synthetic, learned, if at all, by experience. Such a distinction would also bring to light the distinction between a property or a quality and a predicate. When for instance, we talk of 'God (concept)' that it 'exists', 'exists' is a *predicate, not a property*; and when we talk of 'God (proper name)' that it 'exists', 'exists' is a *property, not a predicate*. And it is more with the former, than with the latter, that is, more with the predicate, than with property, that the ontological argument is about. In the light of this, I think that the whole controversy was misdirected, since it centred around 'property' when in fact it is centred around 'predicate'. And in this, I think, Russell's position is more reasonable and correct than Moore's.

It is, again, with 'existence' as a predicate, and not as a property or quality, that Russell and Ryle are concerned when they held that 'existence is equivocal' and Quine when he rejected this view while maintaining that 'existence is univocal'. As Ryle⁴ says, "A man would be thought to be making a poor joke who said that three things are now rising, namely, the tide, hopes and the average age of death. It would be just as good or bad a joke to say that there exist prime numbers and Wednesdays and public opinions and navies, or that there exist both bodies and minds". While Quine⁵ says, "Why not say that chairs and questions, however unlike, are hard in a single inclusive sense of the word? There is an air of Zeugma about 'The Chair and question were hard' but is it not due merely to the dissimilarity of chairs and questions? Are we not in effect calling 'hard' ambiguous, if at all, just because it is true of some very unlike things? Essentially this same question comes up in instances that are taken seriously. There are philosophers who stoutly maintain that 'true' said of logical or mathematical laws and 'true' said of weather predictions or suspects' confessions are two usages of ambiguous term 'true'. There are philosophers

who stoutly maintain that 'exists' said of numbers, classes and the like, and 'exists' said of material objects are two usages of ambiguous term 'exists'. What can they possibly count as evidence? Why not view 'true' as unambiguous but very general and recognise the difference between true logical laws and true confessions? And correspondingly for existence?" Thus Quine finds 'no evidence' for calling 'existence' and 'truth' ambiguous when predicated of things of different types.

IV

My position in this context can be summed up in the following points :

1. I do not accept the ontological argument for the existence of God. I don't accept, in other words, that the existence of God can be convincingly proved or inferred from the concept or idea of God, since I hold that existence and concept or idea have logically nothing to do with each other.

2. I do not deny that existence is not a property or a quality like any other quality. But this denial does not logically bind me to deny that existence is or can be a predicate. In other words, I subscribe to the view that though existence is not a property, it can be used as a predicate. Since property or quality is experiential and predicate is logical. And, therefore, denial of one does not necessarily lead to or mean, denial of the other.

3. Thus contradictory as it may sound I reject the ontological argument but accept that existence can be a predicate, if not a property, since a relevant meaning can be given to 'exists'.

4. I do not see why Moore's 'open question argument' that he uses for considering 'good' cannot with equal force be used for considering 'existence', and if, therefore, 'good' can be considered as a predicate, why not 'existence'?

Department of Philosophy
Nagpur University, Nagpur.

S. W. Bakhle

NOTES

1. *Philosophical Papers*, G. E. Moore, (1959)
2. *Classics of Analytic Philosophy*, Ed. Ammerman.
3. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, Ed. Flow and Mac Intyre.
4. *Concept of mind*, p. 23.
5. *Words and Objects*, pp. 130-31.