

EXISTENTIAL AND ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENTS

Every form of study has its presuppositions. Philosophical analysis is no exception to this. Analysis may be either progressive or regressive. The former aims at locating the basic objects we are committed to in our assertions, and the latter aims at deciphering the conceptual scheme presupposed in our discourse. We will briefly state the nature of such commitment and discuss the role of conceptual apparatus involved therein.

1. **The Commitments** : There is a *prima facie* distinction between the ontological commitment and the existential commitment though the two are closely related one way or another. To be is to be *something* (ontological), and to be something is *to be* at least (existential). In common parlance, terms like "thing", "object" and "substance" are indiscriminately used. In order that we may distinguish between the two types of commitments we are required to be more precise about the use of these terms. The only thing that we may say about anything, by virtue of its being a thing, is that it *is* or exists. To be a thing is to exist at least. To say that there are things that do not exist is to utter nonsense.

According to Kant "exist" is not a predicative expression. Every predicate is supposed to give some information about the subject when we say that the rose is red, that the rose smells sweet, etc., we describe the flower with predicates like "is red", "smells sweet" etc. But when we further say that the rose exists, we do not add any new attribute to it; there is no progress in knowledge. If, however, we deny existence of any assumed thing, such denial is often informative in nature. The assertion, "unicorns do not exist" may supply us with some information, i.e., correct our notion of the world of objects in a way. "Unicorns", the later logicians would say, do not stand for any subject (logical). It is, so to say, a predicate of a complex nature, it represents a cluster of qualities. Non existence of unicorns here means that the set of qualities represented as 'unicorn' has not been exemplified. That is to say, for any x (thing), it is not one that possesses the set of attributes. It does not say that the attributes are severally unreal or that there are no x 's. It means that the attributes together have

not been exemplified in any x , where x stands for anything capable of being characterised one way or another. Thus, when we deny existence we presuppose a range of values none of which exemplifies certain characteristics. Every statement, in a sense, involves existential commitment.

The ontological commitment, however, is a more precise commitment. When we commit existentially we say or imply that something *is*, when we commit ontologically we say *what* it is. The ontological commitment is a commitment as to the thing's having some character, a character that determines its role in the world process. To commit ontologically is to assign a character to a *thing* which transforms the *thing* into an *object*. To call something an *object* as distinguished from calling it a *thing merely*, is to subsume it under a category. *Objects* presuppose a categorial or conceptual scheme.

2 (i). Role of Category-words : If all things were material, and there were no material things other than wooden, then the terms "substance", "material" and "wood" would be co-extensive. There are admittedly non-wooden things; it is not likely, therefore, that "wood", like "matter" or "substance", will be used as a category word. "Roughly speaking" in the words of Ernest Gellner, "a category is a term which indicates a whole species of human discourse". Hence the sentence, "The table is wooden" is taken to be an expression in the object-language, while the sentence, "The table is a substance", is viewed as a meta-linguistic expression. If the table is taken to be a descriptive word (either because the table is not given in acquaintance, or for any other reason) we are required to bring in variable x as a proxy for anything capable of being characterised by material properties like shape, size, woodenness etc. The possible values of x are the items of the material world. A category word like "substance" or "matter" is one which defines a set of things by some generic trait, i.e., sets a limit upon the possible ways in which the things may be conceived or characterised. We may conceive of a class of things each member of which could be characterised by any one or other of the material properties. This class will be composed of things like gold, silver, wood, plastic, etc. All these are subsumed under the category "matter" or "material substance". If substances other than the material are not entertained,

"matter" and "substance" would be considered co-extensive. In every occasion for a discourse we take for granted a range of values which is not arbitrarily selected, but determined by some general principle. Thus, when we talk of a table we talk of a thing as determined by the generic trait of materiality or substantiality. We might talk of a table, as determined by the general character of woodenness. In the latter case we ignore the possibility of non-wooden articles, or, we are just not interested in such things. Our discourse here is kept within the frame of reference. Thus, we may discuss the quality of wood (specific character) a table is made of; we may say that the table is made of mahogany or of silvery oak. In such cases the things alluded to are all assumed to belong to the class of wooden articles.

When we think about anything, or intend to communicate with others we keep within a frame-work or system of categories. In course of the same discourse we cannot raise any question as to the frame-work which we have already assumed, without involving absurdity. It is for this reason, "existence questions were ruled meaningless by Carnap when they turned on category words." When I try to ascertain the quality of wood the table is made of, I cannot, within the perview of the same discourse, indulge in the question as to whether there are things made of wood at all; or when I try to ascertain whether the table is made of wood or of plastic, I cannot simultaneously try to determine whether there are things characterised by materiality at all. We do, at times, raise these 'forbidden' questions. Such questions might be meaningful at a different level of discourse. Changes in the levels of discourse lead to more and more inclusive (wider) categories; and, the items subsumed under them are determined by more and more generic traits, till we come upon the universal class where the ontology question is reduced to the questions of existence. The generic traits function as the determinables under which individuals are determined one way or another. The generic traits are not always matters of generalisation; they may very well be presuppositions of our discourse. It is for this reason that a *category* is not traditionally conceived as a *class*. A class is usually supposed to be an abstraction, i. e. a matter of generalisation, while a category is conceived as a matter of presupposition. A class is supposed to have *members*, a category is supposed to have *instances* only.

(ii) **Formal Character and Categories :** To say of anything informatively is to assign some determination to it. The *objects* that Wittgenstein speaks of are items that have internal or formal properties. These are things whose possible roles are predetermined by their formal character. The formal or logical character of the particulars assumes the status of (usurps the functions of) a category. The material properties, according to Wittgenstein, belong to facts, i. e., to complexes of objects. That an object may combine with certain others *in a particular way* follows from the formal properties of the object. By considering a *thing* as an *object* Wittgenstein assigns a character to it. Its formal character is that which makes it possible to unite with certain other objects in certain definite ways. Of the several ways in which it may unite with other objects it has actually followed one.

Now, for instance, objects A and B so combine as to yield the fact that A is above B. A and B being what they are, A could be below B, or by the side of B. For Wittgenstein the entire set of such possibilities is determined by the formal characters of A and B. To an ordinary man such possibilities might be accounted for by the objects being physical. A and B may so combine as to yield the fact that A precedes B, or that A succeeds B, or, else, that A and B are contemporaneous. For a plain man such possibilities are determined by the temporal character of objects. The formal or logical character of objects, in a case like this, is reducible to the spatio-temporal frame-work within which the objects are conceived to play their role. The possible situation that A and B may mutually describe must conform to the space-time frame-work, which is logically prior to the actual situation that A and B together actually compose. A conceptual scheme is presupposed on every occasion we talk of facts or of particulars which are not 'absolutely bare' or characterless. But a conceptual scheme that may accommodate facts like 'A is taller than B', may not leave any scope for a fact like 'A loves B' or 'A hates B'. Considered merely as physical things, A and B might not be supposed to unite in various other ways. When we view objects as forming facts of a different nature, we do not always change the *level* of discourse; we change the level when we view an article of furniture as a material object instead of viewing it more specifically as a *wooden object*. At times the changes made may be more radical. We may switch over to a new

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