

The Nature of Existence

Only a philosopher would try to understand the essential nature of existence. Preliminary enquiries only seem to offer synonyms for 'exist', such as 'be' or 'happen' or 'actualise'. Many philosophers would stop there, and treat existence as an undefined primitive concept. The more ambitious consider the contrast with non-existence, or look for insights in the modes of existence, or in the character of the types of thing said to exist, or in the start and end of existence, or in the reasons and criteria for something to exist. Such studies are known as 'ontology'.

If it is true that 'you can't get something from nothing', then existence can't have a beginning, and if it ever ceased it could never return, implying that what exists is eternal. Maybe this even leads us to the 'necessitarian' view – that everything that exists has to exist. The Big Bang theory discourages claims that existence is eternal, but we have no adequate explanation for the Bang, so eternal existence remains an option. If we detect such a necessity or eternity in existence, that throws some light on its nature. A second aspect of the necessity in existence is to ask whether there must exist something rather than nothing. Suggestions are that there must be a divine being, whose nature requires further creation, or that some proposition must always be true (such as 'p or not-p') so its subject-matter has to exist, or that logic has an inner requirement for the 'maximal consistency' which only existence can provide.

If we believe something exists, and cannot conceive of its non-existence (a number, for example), then that thing necessarily exists. Yet the non-existence of such things does not seem to imply a contradiction, since 'nothing whatever exists' seems coherent. Possible non-existence makes existence more vivid, but doesn't seem to illuminate the nature of existence. The difficulty with the non-existence is how we can talk about it, since there is nothing to refer to. Some claim that a circular square has to be square, so it must exist to be described, despite the contradiction.

A key question is whether 'exists' is a univocal concept – that is, does it have a single meaning, or are there degrees, modes or levels of existence, referred to as 'being', 'subsistence', or 'dependent existence'? Things like shadows and holes seem to contain less existence than solid objects, and abstract entities like numbers, laws of nature, redness (a 'universal'), values and inflation rates may be thought to exist, but not in a very robust sense. If 'exist' is univocal, then passing a test for existence is all-or-nothing, and ontology is very challenging if a firm decision is always needed.

We might distinguish between existence and Being. Thus things exist in a univocal and common sense way, but Being covers a much broader spectrum. Things which only potentially exist have Being, in the essential nature of what the thing is, and abstractions may have Being, even though they lack existence. Being is also a state, perhaps experienced in conscious awareness, where existence is confined to specific objects (or 'substances'). Existence can then be explained quite fully, by seeing what constitutes a legitimate substance, where the mere state of Being invites more speculative (and even poetic) treatment. Some critics of substances prefer to base their ontology on events, processes, which would blur the distinction between general Being and substantial existence.

It would be nice if there were some criterion which distinguished the existent from the non-existent. The best known criterion is that what exists must be capable of interaction, or have causal powers. This clearly favours physical existence, and seems to rule out abstract existence. It fits well for normal objects, and even for obscure objects such as neutrinos. If a subatomic particle were so shy that it never interacted, this principle would rule it as non-existent, which seems a bit presumptive on our part. An enduring problem for ontological theories of this kind is the existence of space and time, which seem all too real, and yet to be neither causally empowered, nor physical, nor abstract. We focus on the contents of existence, but space and time seem to be the containers of existence.

An alternative criterion for existence might refer to human experience, or to human talk. To say that only what we directly experience exists would go too far, but the possibility of at least indirect experience might be a requirement for existence. We might speculate about things too remote to be experienced, but we are on shaky ground. A modern approach to these questions is through language: that we derive what exists from the theories we hold to be true, though this doesn't seem to capture the fine-grained experiences of existence we rely on through our senses.

A significant discussion concerns whether existence is a property (or predicate) of objects, or a presupposition about them, or a quantifier (concerning whole sentences about objects). We might say that some imaginary coins lack existence, whereas real coins possess it, where existence sounds like a property of the actual coins. It is obviously a highly general property, shared by everything else which exists. Critics say that there is no difference between the actual coins in these two cases (they are all round, metallic etc) so existence is not an additional feature, which we could expect from a property. Maybe existence or non-existence are just unspoken assumptions, or they can be expressed using quantifiers ('all' or 'some') to say what the terms of our sentences refer to. That approach seems very reliant on language, and so the logical status of 'exists' remains disputed.

A more drastic linguistic approach is to say that existence is relative, only making sense in a specified area of discussion. Thus physics makes one set of existence assumptions, fiction another, and chess another. If we try to step outside all of the systems and conventions of thought, and talk universally of existence, the grounds become too remote, vague and speculative. However, if fictional characters exist within fictional systems, this is not what most of us mean by 'exist', so firmer criteria are probably needed. Mathematical and physical existence seem very different.

A radical view of existence says that it is all one; that is, that only one thing exists. It would then be necessary to account for the multitude of apparent things, and their continually changing character. Maybe that is an illusion, or maybe there is a single substance with a huge profusion of properties (such as a field in physics), or maybe what unites the one thing is hidden from us. Critics question how you could tell whether what exists is one or many.

A theory about what exists should make it knowable, logically consistent, and both possible and actual. Ontology is concerned with what exists, and with its general structure and relations, but there is a frustrating deeper puzzle, about how we should understand existence itself, and which occasional glimmers of insight emerge from philosophy.