

## *Change in Existence*

Most discussions of existence in philosophy treat it as a static phenomenon, whereas continual change is the norm we experience. A good theory of ontology must therefore explain the nature of change, and seek an accurate way to describe it. An account might also be sought for what drives change, given in terms of fundamental laws or powers. As so often, views on the nature of change range between extremes – which are the possibilities that nothing ever actually changes, or that everything continually changes. If nothing really changes, that makes the appearance of change an illusion, which must rest on some a priori claim, such as that if reality ever changed it would gradually collapse into chaos. An ancient view was that change really does not occur, and reality is eternal and unchanging (and beautifully spherical). A modern view (with some support from physics) takes the passage of time to be an illusion, with all times co-existing in a single unified space-time. Thus a physical object is an entity extended across time (as it is across space), and so its ‘time slices’ are parts of a single thing, just like its spatial parts. Thus the concept that the entity is ‘changing’ drops out, replaced by a quite different description of things.

Not many modern thinkers accept the ancient denial of change, and there is sharp division over the modern view. The other extreme view, that change is universal and the very essence of reality, was expressed in the ancient slogan that ‘all is flux’. This approach is still accepted by those who argue that reality should be understood in terms of processes and events, rather than of objects and their properties. However, if the nature and properties of objects can change, then a fairly comprehensive account of change can be built on that basis.

There are several general types of change in an object. Beginning and ceasing to exist are the most dramatic forms of change. Once a thing does exist, it can increase or diminish in magnitude, and it can change its location in space. A thing can also change its superficial qualities (such as colour), or undergo more fundamental change in its essential nature or type (that is, change in substance). A rearrangement, such as the shuffling of cards, seems to be a sort of change, and there is also change by exact substitution of parts, while leaving the object’s qualities unchanged. One unchanging object might also change its relations to other objects (called ‘Cambridge change’), but this doesn’t seem to qualify as real change, if the object’s intrinsic features stay the same.

So many types of change might call for a variety of explanations, or it might be possible to lump them together in a single account. If our picture of reality involves just objects with properties, then change may be just switches among the properties which attach to the different objects, though this might not explain the creation or destruction of the objects themselves. There is also uncertainty about how we should understand properties. Maybe all change is just movement of some sort, and all of the modes of change described here can be characterised as types of movement. Even change of qualities might actually be microscopic movements, and beginning and ceasing could be understood as hidden movements or rearrangements. This is a very physical view of change, and we may also want to account for change in moral values, or in styles of proof in mathematics.

A radical departure from reliance on objects is to see reality as entirely constituted by processes. Since physical objects continually change through time (at quantum or on larger scales), a mountain can be seen as a very slow-moving process, rather than as an object. The theory of evolution was a stimulus for this approach. For a clear theory we need an account of the nature of a process, an idea of its constitution or ingredients, and a way to individuate each process. A process can be stable or fluctuating, and may have no clear beginning or end, so pinning it down is tricky. Processes usually occur over time (so time must be seen as something which ‘passes’), and at a measurable rate (if they fluctuate). They also involve some sort of raw materials, and a waterfall is a characteristic example. We would expect enduring forces or mechanisms or laws to be operational within a process, to preserve its distinctive character. Typical processes are physical, but a computer algorithm is an abstract process which can be variously implemented. An account of processes cannot invoke constituent objects, since objects are to be explained as processes.

A more modest challenge to a initial static object-based ontology is to include events among the fundamentals of reality. Our ordinary talk continually picks out events, most clearly when we discuss causes and effects, and modern science tends to be presented as relationships between events. If flicking a switch turns on a light, we are breaking the world down into adjacent events, and change might just be one event triggering the next event. Since events take time and involve action, they contain change as an ingredient. If we can individuate events, by placing them in space-time, or in a causal chain, then we can break change down into component parts (although events, of course, overlap, or co-exist). If, as has been suggested, we take events as primitive facts of our understanding, then no further explanation of change can be given.

However, although thought and talk treat events as fundamentals for description and explanation (e.g. in verbs and adverbs), events take time and have components, and we can analyse the changes within an event like the flicking of a switch. We then find ourselves with the original dilemma, of describing the innards of an event as either micro-processes or as objects changing their properties. Either way, the account of change becomes so microscopically fine-grained that it is beyond our experience. It may be that the experience of change within our own consciousness is a better starting point for theories of change. We can also approach change through our theories of time, since the two are so closely linked. We may find that if time is a primitive of metaphysics, then so is change.

Whether we treat change as explicable, or as primitive, we can still seek the underpinning of change. A common view is that change only makes sense if it rests on something unchanging. The process view may deny this, but seems to need sustained and stable forces or laws in the background. Those who prefer to start with objects favour an unchanging essence within a substance, as the subject to which changes can occur. A bigger view is that all of reality must contain one or more unchanging unities at its core, preserving reality while its changes occur. There may even have to be necessary existents, or necessary truths, as an eternal bedrock in a changing universe. Music is the art form which exploits and celebrates change.