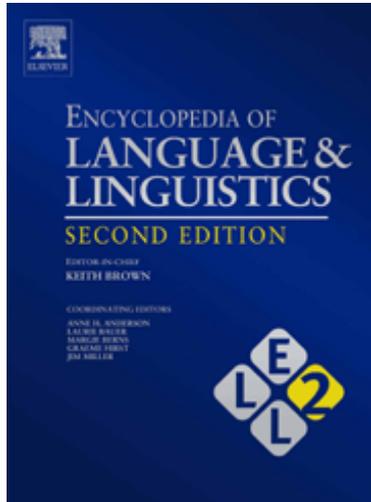


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## Existence

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### What Existence Is

*Existence* is the property that is attributed to Uma Thurman in

- (1) Uma Thurman exists.

Perhaps existence is also attributed to some object in

- (2) There is an even prime.

There is a connection between existence and (objectual) quantification: what exists is exactly what our quantifiers quantify over, when our quantifiers are unrestricted. Sometimes our quantifiers are restricted so that they quantify over only some of the things that exist. For example, in

- (3) All the bottles of beer are in the fridge.

the quantifier “all the bottles of beer” is naturally interpreted so that it doesn’t quantify over **all** of the bottles of beer in existence. But what exists is not limited to what our quantifiers quantify over when they are restricted in one way or another. (In various free logics, variables need not be interpreted so as to have as values objects that exist. Sometimes a special predicate is introduced for ‘exists’ in these logics. Existence is not tied to quantification in these logics, although it might be tied to the special predicate.)

It seems that existence is a property that everything has: namely, the property *existing* or *being existent*. But various philosophers deny this for various reasons: some deny that existence is a property; others accept that existence is a property but deny that any objects have it (because only properties do); and still others accept that existence is a property but deny that all objects have it (because only some do).

### The Hume-Kant View

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) denied that existence is a property. (It is often said that existence is not a predicate. This is at best a confused way of denying that existence is a property.) Let us call the view that existence is not a property the *Hume-Kant view*. One reason for holding the Hume-Kant view is that existence is supposedly not a property but rather a precondition for having properties. After all, how could something have any properties if it did not exist?

But it is hard to see what a precondition is if it is not a property. For example, being human might be a precondition for being a movie star; and *being human* is a property.

Another reason for holding the Hume-Kant view is that to say that something has a property F and exists is supposedly not to say anything more than that something has F. For example,

- (4) Uma is a movie star and exists.

supposedly doesn’t say anything more than

- (5) Uma is a movie star.

But if this is a good reason to deny that existence is a property, then it is also a good reason to deny that *being self-identical* or *being either round or not round* is a property. For if (4) doesn’t say anything more than (5), then

- (6) Uma is a movie star and is self-identical.

and

- (7) Uma is a movie star and is either round or not round.

don’t say anything more than (5) either. But it seems that *being self-identical* and *being either round or not round* are perfectly respectable properties. For example, *being round* is a perfectly respectable property. And if negations and disjunctions of perfectly respectable properties are themselves perfectly respectable properties, then *being either round or not round* is also a perfectly respectable property.

### The Frege-Russell View

Some philosophers who accept that existence is a property deny that everything has it, because they think that no *objects* have it; rather, they think that only *properties* have it. On this view, *existence* is not a (first-level) property of objects; rather, it is a (higher-level) property of properties. In particular, it is the property *being instantiated*. This is a view that was held by the German mathematician and philosopher Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) and, at least at one time, by the British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970). Let’s call this view the *Frege-Russell view*.

One reason for holding the Frege-Russell view is that if existence were a property of objects, then it would not be possible to be mistaken in ascribing that property to an object. (By contrast, one can attribute the property *being instantiated* to the property *being a golden mountain*, say, even if that property is

not instantiated.) But if this is a good reason to deny that existence is a property of objects, then it is also a good reason to deny that *being self-identical* or *being either round or not round* is a property of objects. For it is not possible to be mistaken in ascribing those properties to an object either. And yet they are perfectly respectable properties of objects.

Another reason for holding the Frege-Russell view comes from the problem of negative existentials. A *negative existential* is a sentence like

- (8) The golden mountain doesn't exist.

which seems to say of some object that it doesn't exist. For example, (8) seems to say, of the object that "the golden mountain" refers to, that it doesn't exist. Either "the golden mountain" refers to something or it doesn't. On the one hand, if "the golden mountain" doesn't refer to anything, then it seems that (8) doesn't say anything about anything. On the other hand, if "the golden mountain" does refer to something, then it seems that it must refer to something that exists, in which case (8) says, of something that does exist, that it doesn't exist. Either way, it seems that (8) can't be true. But (8) seems true; hence the problem.

The Frege-Russell view offers a straightforward solution to the problem of negative existentials. On the Frege-Russell view, (8) says, of the property *being the golden mountain*, that it does not have the property *being instantiated*. And it is true that the property *being the golden mountain* does not have the property *being instantiated*. So, on the Frege-Russell view, (8) is true, as desired. (Russell's treatment of definite descriptions like "the golden mountain" is actually more complicated. (see **Descriptions, Definite and Indefinite: Philosophical Aspects**). One might worry that even if Russell's treatment solved the problem of negative existentials for sentences like (8), it wouldn't solve the problem of negative existentials for sentences like

- (9) Santa Claus doesn't exist.

which contain names rather than definite descriptions (see **Proper Names: Philosophical Aspects**).

One problem with the Frege-Russell view is that (8) doesn't seem to say the same thing as

- (10) The property *being the golden mountain* doesn't have the property *being instantiated*.

Similarly,

- (11) If the golden mountain were to exist and if cows were to fly, then just as they would have the property *being able to fly*, it would have the property *being golden*.

seems true, and it doesn't seem to say the same thing as

- (12) If the property *being the golden mountain* were to have the property *being instantiated* and if cows were to fly, then just as they would have the property *being able to fly*, it would be instantiated by something that has the property *being golden*.

Another problem with the Frege-Russell view is that the property *being instantiated* doesn't seem to be fundamental in the right sort of way. It seems that facts about which properties have the property *being instantiated* depend on quantificational facts. For example, it seems that the property *being a movie star* has the property *being instantiated* only because some object (Uma, say) instantiates the property *being a movie star*. But it seems that objects (Uma, say) can instantiate properties (*being a movie star*, say) only if they exist. So if it is to be instantiated, then the property *being instantiated* seems to require that some objects exist and hence that, contrary to the Frege-Russell view, existence be a property that at least some objects have.

### The Meinong-Russell View

Some philosophers who accept that existence is a property deny that everything has it, because they think that some, but not all, objects have it. At one time, Russell thought that there is a broad ontological property that everything has; but he thought that this property is *being* (or *subsisting*), not *existing*. On this view, the golden mountain, the round square, numbers, sets, tables, and chairs have being; but only tables and chairs (and other objects that are located in space and time) exist. The Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong (1853–1920) held a similar view. He thought that there is a broad ontological property that everything has; but he thought that this property is *being an object*, not *being* or *existing*. On this view, the golden mountain, the round square, numbers, sets, tables, and chairs are objects; but of these, only numbers, sets, tables, and chairs have being. (And only tables, chairs, and other objects that are located in space and time exist.) Let's call this – the view that although there is a broad ontological property that everything has, only some objects exist – the *Meinong-Russell view*.

One reason for holding the Meinong-Russell view is that it offers a straightforward solution to the problem of negative existentials. On the Meinong-Russell view, (8) says, of the object "the golden mountain" refers to, that it doesn't exist, and "the golden mountain" refers to an object that doesn't exist. So, on the Meinong-Russell view, (8) is true, as desired.

But the Meinong-Russell view doesn't solve parallel problems. A *negative subsistential* is a sentence like

(13) The golden mountain has no being.

that seems to say of some object that it has no being. Those who distinguish being and existence sometimes say that "there is" has to do with being, not existence. On this view,

(14) There is no golden mountain.

is also a negative subsistential. And a *negative objectual* is a sentence like

(15) The golden mountain isn't an object.

or

(16) No object is the golden mountain.

that seems to say of some object that it isn't an object. Speakers who have the intuition that (8) is true might also have the intuition that (13)–(16) are true. And if a solution to the problem of negative existentials should respect speakers' intuition that (8) is true, then one might think that a solution to the problem of negative subsistentials or negative objectuals should similarly respect speakers' intuition about (13)–(16). But on the Meinong-Russell view, (13) and (14) or at least (15) and (16) are false, because "the golden mountain" refers to an object that has being or at least is an object. (This argument might work best against those who say that (8) is false but (14) is true.) Solving the problem of negative existentials only at the cost of not solving the problem of negative subsistentials or the problem of negative objectuals doesn't seem like much of a benefit. In addition, many dislike the Meinong-Russell view because, by saying that existence is what Russell (1903) once called "the prerogative of some only amongst beings," the view offends what Russell (1919) later described as "a robust sense of reality."

If one rejects the Hume-Kant view, the Frege-Russell view, and the Meinong-Russell view, one is left with the view that existence is a property that everything has. Although there is much to commend this view, those who hold it still have to solve the problem of negative existentials. This suggests that a solution to that problem will not come from views about existence. And once one had a solution to the problem of negative existentials (whatever that solution is and wherever it comes from), it seems that there would be little to prevent one from holding the view that existence is a property that everything has.

*See also:* Descriptions, Definite and Indefinite: Philosophical Aspects; Empty Names; Fictional Discourse: Philosophical Aspects; Negation: Philosophical Aspects; Nominalism; Objects, Properties, and Functions; Proper Names: Philosophical Aspects.

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